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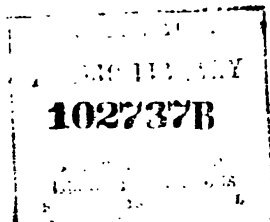
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MAY 27 1909

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To
MY WIFE

NORAH CONOUGH

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CHAPTER I

IN a certain part of the Eastern Land Division of New South Wales stood a hut, new and substantial, on a prettily timbered ridge. The style of architecture was (with apologies) of the Spartan period. A squat chimney—the lower part slabs lined with brick-shaped pieces of earth, the upper galvanized iron—occupied the greater part of one end. The floor was of earth, the roof of bark, and the walls were slab. Of the two rooms, one, by reason of its pair of bunks, chest of drawers and looking glass, was distinguishable as a bedroom; though such a room does not usually contain a pack-saddle, crosscut saw, or maul and wedges. In the other room a safe, with bits of opossum skin round the legs, fur outwards, as a protection from ants, broke the monotony of one wall; a frying pan, aided by a couple of saddles, guns, and wire dish covers, adorned another.

* Pronounced "Kun-oh," with accent on "oh."

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Donald Southerden, the owner of the hut, sat one October evening gazing at a heap of hot ashes in the fireplace. The evening was warm, and the ashes merely covered a damper which Donald had just made.

His brother Peter, sleeves tucked up, was busy brightening a saddle—the white of an egg, a scrap of old shirt, and abundant elbow-grease being the ingredients used in this operation.

A yawn, a mutter, and a sigh from Donald broke the quiet that reigned.

“What’s up, Dan? Thinking of Rowland’s P-N?” said Peter, polishing away at a knee-pad. It was one of Peter’s whims to call his brother “Dan.”

“Rowland’s P-N be hanged,” replied Donald, “it’s the first and last promissory note I’ll endorse for anybody.”

“Perhaps you’re thinking of the lass you left behind you,” continued Peter.

“Didn’t leave one.”

“The half-dozen then. One lost love is grievous, but seven or eight! Cheer up, me son. You ought to be cheerful with your choice little property that will fatten one hundred and eighty bullocks, with its water-holes, green flats, and palatial residence under your own gum and hickory. And I haven’t a place of any



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kind—nothing but my old roan, and gun, and fiddle, and Boiler—whom I shall have to sell to meet that P-N; eh, Boiler, old man?”

The last named lazily twitched one ear and wagged a portion of his tail feebly on the floor, while a kindly light shone in his eyes. He was a wall-eyed cattle dog, his color that of a white dog after sleeping in a newly burnt-out stump hole—charcoal spots on an ashen ground. His body was powerful, his countenance much scarred. Lying there so comfortably and peacefully on the floor, one would scarcely believe he could be such a silent cattle-heeling demon, or so sour a fighter. Needless to say his qualities made him the pride of his master. Boiler in return would recognize no other authority. His name was inspired by his appearance after an undisturbed encounter, in the days of his youth, with a dish of fresh milk.

Presently Peter, with a piece of pine, felt through the ashes and sounded the damper—not one of the old pioneer flour-and-water type, which has practically disappeared in these days of easy access to baking powder, milk, and salt.

“Just right,” he exclaimed, as a buoyant sound answered the somewhat vicious prod. He poked the damper unceremoniously out of the ashes and began to dust it with a towel.

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"I hear Miss Conough has come home," he remarked. "What's she like?"

"I never saw her, so can't say. Heard she was a demon rider, and rides a grand bay mare that can jump anything. Wish I had that hundred and forty acres she took up—it's the eye of the district. There's not a prettier spot, nor a finer waterhole, in New South Wales."

"Marry her," said Peter.

"Not a bad idea. The place joins this, and the two would make a model little property. There's a perfect spot for a house, and a dashed decent little cottage already, put up for improvement and not used by anybody. Don't think I'll put up a better house myself till I see Miss Conough. Mightn't want it."

"Her father has come down a bit, hasn't he?"

"Yes, poor old man. He had a fine run here some time ago, and it was then, I am told, that Miss Conough took up the selection to keep chaps like us off; they say she has a few hundred of her own. The bank closed on the old man at an awkward time and he lost pretty well all he had, but fixed things up somehow—probably his daughter helped him. Anyhow he took up a selection about six miles off, the one we passed yesterday. Nice place, too. It's generally known as 'The Waterholes.'"

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"How is it he didn't go for this place of yours?" asked Peter.

"He did. We applied together and balloted, and I won. He didn't bear me any malice. 'I'll have a good neighbor anyhow, me little b'y,' said he; 'I like to see little b'ys like yourself coming about.' He's about the finest-looking man I ever saw, strong body and strong face. He stands six feet three at least, and is as active as I am for all his white hair, which is very white—snow on a mountain peak kind of thing. Every one speaks of him as 'Old O. C.'—short for Owen Conough—sort of affectionate nickname."

"How is it you've never seen Miss Conough?" asked Peter.

"She has been away. I expect we'll soon meet her."

"Then you'll be able to proceed with the acquirement of her non-residential C. P."*

"H'm," said Donald, "she might be too old."

"What odds if she is. And on the other hand she probably is young and blooming."

"She can't be so very young, as she must have been twenty-one before she could take up the land, and that was done four years ago."

"Very likely it was done as soon as she came of age."

*Land conditionally purchased from the Crown on special terms in consideration of which the condition of residence is dispensed with.

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Besides, some women remain girls a long time. I'm sure I've seen girls of forty!" said Peter, tossing Boiler a scrap of cold meat from an unwashed plate.

"Well, I don't suppose a fine man like old O. C. would have anything but a fine woman for his daughter. But it's a dashed shame to talk about her like this."

"It's a bit late to say that," replied Peter stretching himself. "Well, I'm off for a 'possum for Boiler."

"Too dark, old man."

"No fear. Boiler 'll find 'em and I'll fetch 'em. I'm a great shot in the dark."

"I say, boy," shouted Donald, as Peter disappeared in the dark.

"Hello!" from the darkness.

"Don't be long out. We have to be up at daylight; I want to get the splitting of those posts and rails finished."

"All right,"—from down the creek.

"And I say, look out for snakes. They're pretty bad just now."

"O. K."—farther down the creek.

Donald picked up a book, read for a few minutes standing, then gave a terrific yawn.

"Can't keep awake somehow. Sixteen hours a day makes one inclined for his roost. Ought to wash up, too," gazing round on nearly two days of unwashed

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cups and plates. "No hot water, though. It'll do in the morning."

He threw up his arms and enjoyed the luxury of a hearty stretch. The action displayed to advantage his powerful figure, so finely proportioned that, except when with smaller men, he scarcely looked his full height of six feet. His face was strong—the eyes brown and energetic, the jaw and chin massive but well modeled and supposed to be clean shaven, though as to this there was, it is to be feared, considerable irregularity. His large head had an abundant covering of dark hair—obstinate but well cut. A handsome man, whose air and manner spoke of careless, unconscious strength—a man comfortable in repose, strenuous in action.

Yet with all his tiredness Donald lay for a long time without sleep. For many months he had been living more or less in solitude, especially so far as female society was concerned. Mrs. Greentree, the landlady of the Inn at Deep Creek, and her three daughters had, however, shown him many kindnesses. And latterly, before Peter's arrival, he had several times upon going in for his mail stayed for tea instead of immediately returning to his lonely abode, where he must be his own cook and housekeeper. Within the last fortnight it had dawned upon him that Mrs. Greentree's

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eldest daughter, Theresa—a creature of splendid form and abounding health, overflowing with animal spirits, and possessing a face of much beauty of an uncultured type, had shown a degree of preference for him that had made him somewhat uncomfortable. She was quite apart from the class of women with whom Donald had hitherto lived in more intimate relationship—his somewhat stately mother, his sister, who, more than any other woman he knew, bore the marks of high breeding, and their friends. Donald had always dimly thought of some cultured woman, of fine physique and much mental charm, as his future wife, should he ever have a wife. Theresa strikingly presented, though not in a specially refined type, one of these features, but as to mental charm—there was just cheery kindness and pluck, a practical understanding of the affairs of everyday life as known to her, and a generous but impetuous and probably stormy temperament. Donald had really nothing in common with her for any close relationship, except the primary and powerful attractions that exist between men and women wherever strong personalities meet. But these, and not the more subtle and delicate charms, constitute the great base upon which the human family progresses and from which it draws its virility. Men and women may, through generations of proud blood and high thinking,

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have reached the highest degree of mental development and charm of spirit, yet the primary passions—loves, hopes, fears, attractions and repulsions of sex—even hatreds—must be there, or their race is doomed. Such had Donald in common with Theresa, and what now troubled him was that, upon their last meeting, he had found in her a certain magnetism, a physical attraction rather than an attraction of spirit, which had drawn him, while in her presence, a little beyond himself. The merely gross had no part in Donald's thoughts—his attitude to women had always been that of protecting and chivalrous care. And now he saw that Theresa was like to become fonder of him than he at all wished, and that he, on one occasion, at all events, had partly yielded to the charm of her sex and personal magnetism. But he saw with equal clearness that he could not, as so many men who have left home and lived in the bush have done, base the tie of marriage, a thing in his mind most sacred, upon such attractions of sex as existed between him and Theresa. And, when in his inmost heart he knew that he did not desire to marry Theresa, a mere flirtation, resulting, perhaps, in the winning of her love, was abhorrent to him. Whatever it meant to him, might it not mean too much to her! He would not take the risk. As he lay there awake he resolved that in future he would never again say or do

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anything that might lead Theresa to think she had any attraction for him beyond her sisters, or any other girls who frequented the Inn. Thus would they both be safe.

Some may regard Donald as a man of extreme simplicity, possibly with a touch of priggishness. But there he was. Having, then, made his unalterable resolve, he went to sleep in peace of mind. Yet his last half-waking moment was filled with a mental vision of Theresa's exuberant personality and glowing dark eyes. So do these things go.

Early in the morning the brothers left the hut, Donald carrying a maul and crosscut saw, Peter an axe and wedges and the inevitable gun. On the brow of the hill they paused. The big waterhole lay to the left, the beautifully timbered rise belonging to Miss Conough beyond it.

Who shall describe a fine spring morning far away from the smoke of a city! The sun was dispelling the mists round the great waterhole—the playground and home of a multitude of birds—and his rays began to light up the trees, showing a thousand dainty gray, and green, and brown tints, which those used to the more contrasted colors of other countries so rashly described as dull and monotonous.

"What a scene, and what music!" said Donald in a thoughtful voice.

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The music was that of twenty or thirty magpies in the big gum tree over the hut, pouring out in utter extravagance of melody their morning song of praise.

"This sort of life's worth living, after all," said Peter; "and," he added with a twinkle, "if I were you, Dan, I should have that fine little property—be Miss Conough tender or be she tough. But be careful how you fall in love. It's a dog's life, I'm told."

"So I've heard," replied Donald. "Had considerable growing pains myself in my calf love. We'll put the bullocks in after lunch, and finish laying that line of fencing."

Then Peter led the way down the hill, breaking into song in a robust tenor. Donald joined in with a powerful, but not over-musical, bass, that must have called down the execrations of many an old father 'possum trying to get a comfortable nap after his night out.

CHAPTER II

OLD BILLY," otherwise William Willoughby—though the second name was practically forgotten—was Mr. Conough's right-hand man. When the latter, having gathered together the remnants of his fortune, settled at The Waterholes, it was Old Billy with whom, of all his men, he would not part. It was Old Billy upon whom Norah, dispensing with the help of any maid, relied in household matters; it was he who in due season helped her in planning and bringing to completion an attractive flower garden, and in carrying out all those little devices which distinguish the home containing a woman from the purely male establishment. He excelled in all matters pertaining to the house, even the dainty arranging of the table—an art in which his young mistress had been his tutor. Although for the last twenty years called "Old Billy," he was but fifty. Well up to the average height, but thin as a hurdle, his weight was under nine stone. His nose had been partially spread over his face years ago by a fall in a steeplechase. The natural expression was in consequence somewhat obscured, but there was no

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mistaking the kindliness of the shaven face with its stubbly brown mustache, and quick light-colored eyes keeping watch out of a bullet head covered with a thick crop of short brown hair.

Old Billy wore a coat somewhat too short, a neck-tie whose principal object was to show off a gold scarf pin symbolizing a horse at full gallop, trousers somewhat too tight—showing his marvelously thin legs to perfection—and held up by a saddle-strap round his middle. His boots were “elastic sides,” and contained neat small feet of which he, a famous dancer, was inordinately proud. He had been jockey, horse-breaker and trainer, shearer’s cook, roustabout, boundary rider, and most other things. Moreover, he had carried mails in the southern district in the bush-ranging days, and had personally known Gilbert, Dunn, and Ben Hall, Larry Cummins and Southgate, and the noted rider Lowry; and on his long lonely rides got off with a whole skin by keeping a quiet tongue in his head when he met the police, however much he knew. For, as he explained, his contract was to carry mails, not to show the whereabouts of bushrangers and get a bullet in the small of his back for his pains. So he said nothing, and the bushrangers appreciated it, Old Billy receiving not a few favors in consequence.

He had been with Mr. Conough continuously for

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fifteen years with the exception of a holiday once a year. For weeks beforehand he talked about this holiday, anticipated with glee the looking up of old chums, planned how he was going to lay out his money, and made an elaborate list of clothes and other things he wanted—not forgetting presents for Norah and Mr. Conough. When the day came for leaving, he dressed himself in his best, caught "The Old Cove," as he called his horse, rode airily away, and inadvertently got drunk at the first public house he came to. After a few days he would return ashamed and dilapidated—taking satisfaction nevertheless in the thought that he had "circulated his money, anyhow."

Norah took Old Billy's outbreaks much to heart, having a sincere affection for this humble companion of her childhood, who had taught her to step-dance, plait, whistle on her fingers, play the concertina, and many other doubtful accomplishments, besides returning her attachment for him with a dog-like devotion. Many a promise of reformation did he make, but his holidays continued to end in the same way. Yet, however drunk, Old Billy never neglected any of his duties; and at races or plowing matches, his pride in doing all, and more than all, that he considered his duty toward his master, found vent in speech.

"I'm a trus'worthy man," he would say, tiptoeing

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erratically. "Ol' O. C. trus' me"—proudly filling out his chest.

Then he would boast about "Ol' O. C." and all that belonged to him, and would put any horse that he chanced to be riding through wonderful evolutions just to show the style of horse that Mr. Conough kept—never a bad one. As a finale Old Billy generally rode full gallop at the nearest fence, and the marvel was that he had not long ago broken his neck.

But the neck remained sound, and Old Billy continued in his capacity of right-hand man. From the outset he showed a great liking for Donald, and, as it were, enrolled him amongst those under his special care. On Donald's comparatively few visits to The Water-holes—this before Norah's arrival—Billy had many opportunities of showing his partiality. Donald's horse received the most scrupulous attention, and his saddle and bridle on each occasion reappeared spotlessly clean. Old Billy would have been immensely hurt by the offer of any tip, but Donald took care that his services were repaid in a manner that did not offend his nice, and somewhat curious, sense of what was due to him as a much-trusted retainer.

There was one man at Deep Creek with whom Old Billy had latterly maintained a kind of armed neutrality, being obliged to meet him frequently in matters

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relating to his trade. This was the local blacksmith, a native-born Australian, known—partly because of his appearance, partly because of his domineering character—as “Nicholas the Rooshian”. He had a small selection close to Deep Creek, and could carry on his blacksmithing in conjunction with it—with such a trade, in such a community, a fair living was a matter of course—also he could safely carry more liquor than any two men of his acquaintance. Old Billy liked him well enough, but Nicholas arrogated to himself an authority in matters relating to horseflesh which Billy could not brook.

The fact that Mrs. Greentree, the kindly landlady of the Deep Creek Inn, had three handsome daughters, naturally accounted for the row of ten or a dozen saddle horses that might have been seen any Sunday afternoon tied along the paling fence enclosing the Inn orchard. Theresa of the black eyes was the handsomest of the daughters, and her black eyes were the primary cause of many more black eyes. One of her admirers was Nicholas—a dangerous-looking man to have for a rival. His thick black beard, deep-set eyes, and heavy brows, seemed like a brewing storm. The storm burst periodically, for Nicholas had been a man of violence from his youth, and held an unbroken record; his latest performance being a popular victory

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over the Eurimbyn champion, Jack Callaghan, a man of evil associates and reputation.

It chanced that athletic sports, followed by a "Free Ball and Supper," were held at Deep Creek. Donald, by special request, acted as judge at the sports, and he and Peter stayed after tea to see what fun could be had. After the first dance, which began early, old Neil McInnes, a man possessing considerable property and a compressed tenor voice, volunteered a song, and the company with much external politeness and much inward fuming resigned itself to listen. Neil's songs were dreaded by all but himself. He sat back in his chair, leaned his head against the wall, and made the night sad for nearly ten minutes, singing of the love and flowers and tears comprised in many verses.

"That's a melancholy song, Mr. McInnes," said Old Billy, as soon as it was finished.

"Yes, a cutting thing, a cutting thing," said the singer. "Did you like it?"

"Oh, yes, very much. It was very amusing, very amusing indeed," replied Old Billy.

Mr. McInnes glanced suspiciously at him for a moment, but Billy was evidently speaking in perfect sincerity.

"It reminds me," said Mr. McInnes, "of another very good song I used to know—a very sad song.

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There were twelve verses in it, but I think I can remember them all. You mustn't mind if I break down. I'll pick it up again."

He leaned back in his chair, his head against the wall, but found he had forgotten the first line.

"Can't somebody get up a dog-fight or something to stop him?" whispered Theresa. "Here, Old Billy, you sing a song. That's as good as a dog-fight."

"I can't really, you know, really," said Billy much embarrassed. "Perhaps Mr. Peter here will substitute me."

"Have another dance instead," said Peter. "I'll play for you."

So Peter, a moment later, found himself with young Greentree's fiddle in his hands tuning up for the "Alberts," while Theresa sweetly explained to Mr. McInnes that they were about to have another dance in order to give him time to think of the beginning of his song. The set was danced with a serious precision accompanied by the occasional jingle of spurs, or the whispering of a gown against the beleggined limbs of some wiry bushman.

The night wore on, and Peter proved himself so good a fiddler and made himself so agreeable that when he wanted to go home he found his saddle and bridle had been hidden by some of the girls, who took this means

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of retaining his services for the night, and to it added their persuasions. So, entering into the spirit of the thing, he stayed and made himself a favorite. Miss Theresa paid him special attention, and he danced with her two or three times in the intervals of fiddling. Nicholas the Rooshian, already sore over Theresa's suspected liking for Donald, was heard to growl something about wringing the necks of puppies.

Mr. McInnes got in his second song about ten o'clock, and a third at eleven. While the last was in progress Donald and Peter stood outside the door in the cool air and enjoyed Theresa's excellent silent mimicry of the singer. Nicholas, looking very black, leaned against a post a dozen feet away. Just then Boiler, seeking his master, came pattering round a corner. As he brushed past Nicholas, the latter, with a "Get out o' this," kicked him violently in the ribs, sending him sprawling. With a low growl Boiler gathered himself and sprang straight at the smith, who, however, dashed him against the wall with one buffet of his great hand. Like a flash Peter caught Boiler by the collar, held him, then with lightning in his steel-gray eyes, faced the smith.

"I'll teach you to kick my dog," he exclaimed.

"No you won't," said Donald quietly, passing one arm round Peter.

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"I don't care which pup I take on," growled Nicholas. "The big 'un or the little 'un, or both. One's as big a mongrel as the other."

"You'll take the big one," replied Donald. "I think you need quieting a little."

"It's my row, Dan," whispered Peter, struggling to get free, "and I mean to see it through."

"So do I—for both of us," was the response. "You can see fair play. May we have a light or two out the front, Miss O'Brien?"

But Old Billy gleefully took charge of the affair, rigged up lanterns on a piece of clothesline over a suitable spot, and made the crowd stand back.

The intending combatants stripped. Nicholas was much heavier than Donald, and about the same height.

"The Rooshian 'll give him slops," remarked a bystander.

"Not him," squeaked Old Billy, hopping about excitedly. "S'elp me if he does I'll stack me clo'es and mix it with him meself, though I *am* only a hurdle."

"You, you imp," said a tall youth with a prominent underlip. "Your face is ugly enough already without any more bashes."

"Ugly!" cried Old Billy. "I knows I'm not a very good-lookin' feller, but thank Gawd I ain't a bloomin' hobject."

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The combatants faced each other—Donald very quiet. The Rooshian, accustomed to paralyzing in the first round all those who faced him, forced the pace from the outset. Hitherto he had been known as a cool and self-possessed fighter, but now he fought with a passionate vengefulness that could only be accounted for by a deep-seated antagonism to his opponent. Donald was forced backwards by the impetuous attack, was hardly quick enough in recovering, and as he went down the Rooshian's supporters cheered. The blacksmith stood back and Donald sprang to his feet, with a dark bruise on his forehead, while his jaws set doggedly and his eyes blazed. Peter, keen and ready, stood by him.

"It's all right, old chap," said Donald, wiping his brow.

The next round was equally rapid, and the crowd screeched as blows were interchanged which would have disabled any man in it. Quickly the pair closed and fell heavily, Donald underneath. As they got up blood was flowing freely from the Rooshian as well as from Donald, and they both breathed hard. Every male about the place had gathered round the fight; even Mr. McInnes, whose song had been brought to such an abrupt conclusion.

The third round began amidst a scene of excitement

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which intensified as the fight went on. The Rooshian, caring only to punish, and hard as iron, pressed Donald with deep-breathed intensity. Twice more they closed and on both occasions Donald came down beneath the Rooshian, the first time after a hard struggle, the second more easily, as if reserving himself.

"One of 'em 'll have to be laid out before they stop," said the tall youth.

"Stick to 'im, Mr. Donald, for the honor of the s'lection," shouted Old Billy.

Donald's quiet zeal at length had its reward. The Rooshian took risks once too often, and a howl went up from the crowd when, throwing his whole sinewy frame into the blow, Donald stretched him fairly on his back. So far the latter appeared to have had the best of it, and few of the onlookers had thought much of Donald's chance.

"Two bloomin' quid on Mr. Donald," yelled Old Billy.

The Rooshian shook himself. Donald's last blow had sickened him a good deal, and he evidently thought it time to make an end. He came on like an avalanche, and Donald's great activity was the only thing that saved him. Then the Rooshian got home on his mouth. He staggered back but recovered himself, and rushing in twined his arms round the smith's great

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body. The forced fight and the smith's fury had told badly on his wind; Donald got a good hold and his back cracked as he fairly swung the Rooshian off his feet and threw him violently.

"Hooray!" screamed Old Billy. "S'elp me livin' Harry, I saw him do the same thing one day with a big eight-munts' poddy that two of us couldn't scruff. That'll about bust the blacksmith's bellows."

Two dilapitated men stood up for the eighth round. The Rooshian's one unclosed eye glared through the hair and blood, and he offered a solid front to Donald's hot attack, while his great chest heaved.

"Rush him, Dan—he's licked," whispered Peter.

The Rooshian caught the words and, abandoning caution, struck out again and pressed Donald hard. The struggle seemed more uncertain than ever, and the Rooshian began to hit wildly though Donald's blows were almost as wild. Then he struck out savagely and half at random with all his weight and strength, the crowd roared, and the Rooshian lay still on his back. Nicholas' fury, foreign to his methods of fighting, had helped his opponent not a little. The fight was over.

"Attend to him, Billy," said Peter, indicating the Rooshian.

Donald lay flat on the ground, recovering his wind

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and clearing his mouth of blood before he went to the house for a drink and a wash. The Rooshian soon recovered his senses and was taken in for a like purpose. Half an hour later he and Donald met.

"No malice, I hope," said Donald, holding out his hand. The smith took it.

"I'm not done with you yet," he said. "But you're a grand man an' licked me fair, an' I bear no malice for that. There's no doubt I was bloody impudent, an' I deserved all I got." He could but mumble, for his mouth was in a bad case.

"Let's have a pick-me-up," said Donald. "I hope I'll be twenty miles off next time you want to fight."

"I'll give you a toast," cried Peter, filling up his glass. "Here's to a man who can fight a good fight, and take a beating like a man, and may he prosper in his suit."

Peter waved his glass toward Theresa, and the smith, half hesitating, glanced queerly at Donald. Then he also drank a toast: "The health of you two brothers, and of your bloomin' old dorg, too."

After Peter, with excellent bush surgery, had put three stitches in one of the black brows of the smith, he and Donald prepared to go home. They found Old Billy walking ecstatically on his toes, and quite unable, without assistance, to mount his horse. Once on, his

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thin legs, as if by second nature, kept him in position, and he galloped gloriously home. The tale he told there lost nothing in the telling.

The brothers were about leaving when Theresa called them into a little side room off the veranda for a cup of coffee. Deftly, and with a grace born of perfect physical development, she served them, then stood chatting while they drank. No trace of weariness lay upon her, except perhaps that her face was paler than usual, which made it but the more attractive and seemed to give to her brilliant eyes an added luster.

"Your brother is tired and sore," she said to Peter, when the coffee was finished. "He will sit here while you see to the horses. It is every man for himself to-night."

Donald, already feeling the influence of her dominant femininity, was about to rise when she laid her hand on his shoulder and gently restrained him.

"Stop where you are, Dan," said Peter. "I'll have the horses round in a jiffy."

So Donald sat where he was. His head ached sorely, and indeed his whole appearance was one of dilapidation. As he faced about again the lamp shone in his eyes which, bloodshot and feeling weak, flinched from the glare. Instantly Theresa turned it half down and

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placed it behind Donald. A moment later, damping a handkerchief with cold water fresh from the spring, she placed it gently against his hot brow.

"That's very comforting," he murmured, raising one of his hands to his head. Theresa's free hand closed on it, nor could he withdraw his fingers without a force which he did not like to use.

She knelt by his chair, still pressing the cool handkerchief to his brow, and looked him full in the eyes.

"I have scarcely seen you all day," she said softly, "and you were going without saying good-night."

"Hardly that," replied Donald, "I knew you would be very tired, and——"

"You were going without saying good-night," she whispered, her eyes glowing in the half-light, and her face so near his that he could feel the gentle touch of her breath, "and knowing that I am going away."

"No, I did not know that," said Donald with a curious feeling of regret, touched with a relief which brought him a sense of shame.

"Yes. I shall be with my sister in Sydney until after the New Year. I had been looking forward to the visit for months, and now I do not want to go. I want to stay here. But I suppose I'll have to go. It's all arranged."

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She watched him with searching eagerness, as though seeking a response to an inward feeling which she must avoid putting into words.

"You would have known had you been to see—us, but you have not come for ten days. I go by the coach to-morrow. Will you be sorry! Ah—you were going without saying good-night. Why did you want to?"

His eyes answered her compelling gaze, but his lips said nothing. The glamour of her physical personality lay full upon his senses, strive with it as he might.

"Why did you want to, ah, why did you want to," she murmured once more, her face very close to his. Then, with a thrill that raced through their splendid young bodies her lips touched his, her arms were round his neck, and for a long moment he strained her to him.

A heavy tread shook the veranda without. Donald and Theresa sprang to their feet, and so they stood, facing the open door. Almost unconsciously Theresa still held one of his hands.

Then Nicholas the Rooshian, with bandaged head, appeared in the doorway and saw them. Even in the faint light of the coming dawn his face seemed to blacken with anger.

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"I was lookin' for you," he said to Theresa roughly, "to say good-night before I left. It seems I'm not wanted."

He turned and strode down the veranda.

"Nicholas! Nicholas!" cried Theresa, springing out after him. Donald followed quickly, his mind full of regret that his weakness had led to a situation of possibly surpassing injury to these two people.

Nicholas turned on his heel for a moment, and Theresa stopped, half-appalled by the look upon his face.

"Damn you—curse you!" he said, his glance embracing them both. Then rapidly he walked away.

Almost at the same instant Peter came cheerily round the end of the house with the horses, riding his own and leading Donald's, and pulled up near the step, a pepper-tree branch concealing his head and shoulders.

"Good-night," said Donald mechanically, and holding out his hand to Theresa.

With a thrust that was almost a blow, she put it aside.

"Poor Nicholas would not have wished to leave without saying good-night," she said in a low tone of intensesness. "He, at least, is sure that he is not ashamed of me."

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Without another glance at Donald she went into the house.

Donald paused, irresolute, for a second, then stepped down from the veranda.

"Miss Greentree has gone in," he said. . . .

"My good-night will cover us both."

He rode away with Peter, his anger against himself, the more he dwelt on his conduct, increasing the more.

CHAPTER III

DONALD'S team of ten bullocks, drawing a wagon-load of posts and rails, toiled steadily along under their master's expert handling. Peter, gun on arm, was some distance behind the wagon, hoping for a chance shot. Boiler, sad of countenance, trotted at his heels. The dog, by a precipitate rush, had just spoilt a shot at a wallaby. The hopeless chase, and the severe snubbing received on his return, lay heavily on his spirit.

An old bullock, standing half-asleep with his chin out, chewing his cud, looks a big fool enough, but he is by no means such a fool as he looks. A new chum, armed with a big bullock whip on its long handle, and seeing a team standing at ease, the bullocks chewing their cuds or brushing away the flies with their tails, imagines there is nothing in the world easier than to drive them. He tries. Result—a hot, swearing new chum with the end of the whip round his neck, the bullocks twisting and turning as they please. Who shall say that a working bullock has no sense of humor!

Donald's bruises were almost healed, though there

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was still an ominous-looking green patch under one eye. During the past week he had been in a state of mental exasperation, and, as usual with him under such circumstances, his boundless physical energy was pushed to its utmost limit. At the same rate of working, his selection would in six months be one of the best improved in New South Wales. Gradually under this drastic remedy his frame of mind changed, and a philosophical mood took the place of the previous turmoil of thought, for, so great an influence can a girl exert over a lonely bushman—or a lonely city man, for that matter—that Donald's thoughts had been little better than a turmoil. After all, why should he not marry Theresa—a splendid creature, well fitted to help him subdue the piece of wilderness he had under his hand, and to bear him children of a physique, and possibly a mental caliber, of which any man might be proud. What though her mother kept an inn, a place of hospitality which, if possible, all travelers to the district made their stopping place. It certainly was not a "pub," as frequently known to inland Australia. Rather it was an English inn, respectable, and carried on by self-respecting people. Possibly even his mother, after the first prejudices had worn off, would welcome so fine a woman as Theresa, whose little vulgarisms would soon disappear under more cultured influences.

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She had had the advantage of being taught, in the little local school, by an elderly man who had seen better days, and there was little fault to find with her English. Then unconsciously Donald pictured himself as receiving his mother and sister in the same room with some of Theresa's relations—one or two in particular—whom he had seen, and the thought rather appalled him. But what need for that! The world could not go on if the union of men and women were to be blocked by such side issues. Yet, with all such thoughts, there was a fundamental thought that this was not the love nor the depth of feeling that he had thought would have been his on meeting her who should be his wife—these not the thoughts that would revolve round her personality. Something was lacking—something that would make it unjust—nay, a great wrong—even to her, to marry her until it sprang into existence. What was it, where could it be found?

But just now Donald was doing some ticklish driving, down the edge of a stony hill over a rough bush track disused by all but horsemen taking a short cut, and having a deep creek on one side. Down go the bullocks, Donald vigorously screwing the brake and roaring at the leaders, Lowry and Gilbert, a pair as plucky as the bushrangers after whom they were named, and who died with so much misdirected cour-

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age. A sharp turn round a big gum tree into the creek, where a little bad driving would mean a capsize; a hard pull up the other side over many a stone and past a deeply worn gutter where another capsize was imminent—the proper use of a commanding voice and a dexterously controlled whip, and the wagon was safely over.

“Why the devil don’t you hurry up and give a hand at a pinch like this, instead of mooning after wallabies?” said Donald to the leisurely Peter, who came up on the other side of the team at this moment.

But Peter was gazing beyond Donald with much interest. Donald turned his head, and riding toward him, he saw an old man, and a lady who rode a fiery bay mare in perfect style. The man was big and fine looking, with clean-shaven face and remarkably white hair.

“Well, me little b’y,” said he, “how are ye? Ye know how to handle a team of bullocks anyhow. Let me introduce ye to me daughter. Here, Norah, this is Mr. Donald Southerden, of whom I told ye.”

Donald, clad in trousers, shirt, and hobnailed boots, responded to the introduction simply and frankly. The old felt hat that he raised was sorely dilapidated, the crown having taken a peaked shape owing to its being constantly rolled up and used as a means of urging on

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his horse, or as a bellows, or for lifting the camp oven when hot.

Miss Conough slipped off her gauntlet and held out her hand. Donald took it, and each felt unconscious pleasure in the controlled firmness of the other's grasp. How fatal is a limp, damp hand to the passage of human magnetism!

As their hands clasped their eyes met with the unconscious inquiry natural where persons who are already interested in each other meet for the first time. Donald's heart beat out a powerful response to Norah's glance. "Surely, surely," he vaguely thought, "I have met this woman before, surely I have known her," but there cohesive thought, or rather sensation, stopped, and Donald continued to look at Norah as Adam may have looked at Eve, when in all her primal beauty and power of womanhood, she first stood before him.

"I was just wanting to see ye," said Mr. Conough, after the first greetings. "Why haven't ye been to see me, now?"

"Yes," said his daughter, flushing slightly under Donald's gaze, "I have been here a fortnight and not a soul has come near us except my old friend Miss MacKinnon and her father."

"Well, really," replied Donald, rousing himself, and

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somewhat abashed as he realized that his glance may have been mistaken for rudeness, "I can only say that I scorn excuses, and throw myself on your mercy."

"The mercy is extended, so please let our acquaintance run from to-day, with a complete blotting out of your past misdeeds."

"That I will," said Donald heartily.

"Right, me little b'y," replied Mr. Conough. "Only say 'friendship' instead of 'acquaintance.' Your father was a good friend of mine many a year ago. His son is a chip of the old block, I can see, and must be our good friend, too."

Peter, advancing round the front of the team, now came forward with eyes full of merriment. His face otherwise was solemn as Boiler's, who for his part looked like an undertaker, but showed a decided leaning toward the heels of Miss Conough's mare.

"And this little b'y, never a doubt of it, is your brother of whom I've heard," said the old man to Donald.

"I have heard much about you, too, Mr. Peter," said Miss Conough. "And I am much interested in your violin, and shall expect to see it, and you, and some songs, at The Waterholes one day very soon."

"Thank you, Miss Conough. Your expectation—sit down, Boiler!—will not remain long unsatisfied,"

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replied Peter. "That dog of mine would heel his grandinother."

"My mare's heels certainly seem to tempt him," laughed Miss Conough.

So, while Donald talked with Mr. Conough of the price of store cattle, the cost of fencing, the probability of obtaining a telegraph line to Deep Creek, and other matters of mutual interest, but just at the moment of vague purport to Donald, Norah and Peter discussed music. There is an easy transition from the harmony of sound to the harmony of motion, especially the motion of a well-bred horse; and Miss Conough told Peter that Fidget, her mare, had, when a yearling, been given to her by an uncle; possessed no end of a pedigree, and was amongst her most dearly beloved friends.

The discussion was terminated by Mr. Conough.

"We must move on, Norah," he said, looking at his watch.

"I want a drink first, father." She was off almost before Donald had time to take her mare by the head.

"Would you mind holding her for me? I won't be a second, and she is such a fidget if tied up," said Miss Conough with a smile.

So Donald held the mare, and her mistress sprang lightly down the rough bank, with skirts gathered up just sufficiently to show the neatest thing in riding boots.

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She drank daintily out of her hand, while her father, stretching his mighty form on a rock, gulped down a pint or two with his nose in the water, and Peter took his fill in like manner.

"That was lovely," said Miss Conough, with beautiful wet lips. "We must give the horses some, too, father, and, oh, I left my handkerchief in the saddle pocket."

She was up the bank again before Peter could struggle to his feet to get it. But Donald already had it, and handed it to her.

"Its lace seems hardly adequate for drying purposes," he said.

She laughed, and dried her lips, and chin, and hand. "It is rather absurd," she said, holding out the dainty wet affair, "one of the little absurdities our sex indulge in."

"Well, I like their little absurdities sometimes," replied Donald, rather more earnestly than was necessary. "And it distinguishes them from us. Men are a rough lot at the best. Shall I put you up?"

"I have never found them rough; and you may put me up. Steady, Fidget."

But Fidget, worthy of her name, had no mind to be steady, and fumed and backed, and walked round champing her bit.

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"I'll have to take a flying leap at her," said Miss Conough. She kept by the saddle while Donald reined Fidget in with a firm, but not too tight rein. The mare steadied for a second. "Now,"—and her mistress went into the saddle lightly and easily as a bird.

"Oh, I was going to have loosened the headstall a little; Billy made the bit a shade tighter than it need be," said she.

"It is hardly tight, but a little easing may perhaps be a comfort to the mare," said Donald, and with quick fingers he loosened it a hole—no easy task with the impatient animal.

"She's always rubbing the bridle off, and I have to keep the headstall tight. She broke the forehead band to pieces the other day. What do you think of my new one? I made it myself. Candidly, now!—" and the great gray eyes danced, eyes like a sunny spring day in New South Wales, when the deep blue of the sky is checkered with idle clouds floating loose and gray, and beyond all is the sun—the light of the world—and beyond him—infinity, into which we gaze with heaven knows what longings.

"My candid opinion," said Donald, eyeing the neatly plaited piece of green hide, "is that it is a work of art."

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"Is it now," said Norah merrily. "I'll make you one like it for that bit of praise—that is, when you want it. I love praise."

"I don't think you will ever lack it," said Donald, in a lower tone than he had hitherto used.

"Come on, me gir-r-l," called Mr. Conough. Then he and Norah rode away, Fidget stepping out grandly, her head bob-bobbing in harmony with her hoofbeats as Mr. Conough's strong cob went on beside her at a brisk parson's jog.

Donald and Peter watched the riders over the hill, Mr. Conough waving his hand, and Norah her whip, as they disappeared.

Donald recalled himself, and picked up his bullock whip.

"Stand up, Dozy, you sleepy old devil. Violet, up! Gee, Pansy!"

The bullocks bowed themselves strongly into their bows. Violet was a big blue bullock with a smashed horn and a villainous countenance; Pansy a gaunt bull, broken in as a worker. Peter was responsible for the names.

"I say, Dan, do you think you'll ever own the big waterhole?"

"Beastly pair of cads we were to talk like that," growled Donald. "*Kimya*, Redman! *Waugh*, Lowry!"

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Whistling a light air softly to himself, Peter bestowed a carefully executed wink on Boiler, who answered with a corresponding wink—or its equivalent—from the tip of his tail.

And the team strained steadily on through the timber.

CHAPTER IV

MARY MACKINNON sat skimming the keys of Norah's piano, taking the cream first from one fragment of music and then another.

A violin on a side table attracted her notice. She rose and examined it with critical friendliness. Anything relating to music, her chief passion, at once attracted her.

"Who owns this aristocratic instrument?" she asked.

"Mr. Peter Southerden," replied Norah. "He brought it over last week, and we had a musical evening. He has a fine tenor voice, besides playing well."

"This is most interesting," exclaimed Mary. "I suppose we shall see him and his brother before I leave?"

"Yes, I shall ask them, though in any case they are sure to come. If there are any letters for them at Deep Creek this morning we shall probably see them on the way home. Father always brings their letters if he finds any. You know Mr. Donald Southerden, do you not?"

"Yes," said Mary. For a few moments she busied

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herself looking through Norah's music. Presently she stood up with a song in her hand.

"He stayed at Bringenbogie several times, on one occasion for a fortnight, when he first came up here to inspect. His father and my father were friends."

"Then you know him quite well," remarked Norah.

"Yes," said Mary, looking through the song. "We rode together a good deal," she added, after a pause. "He is magnificent with horses. Amongst other episodes, he mastered the station outlaw, a supposed incurable."

"Which reminds me that Billy will have the horses ready in ten minutes. We must get our habits on."

"All right," replied Mary. "Just when I've tried this song."

She turned back to the piano, a relic of better days, and began the song in a rich soprano voice. Nature had given her a voice of extraordinary beauty, and her father had spared no expense, and Mary no pains, in its cultivation.

She was three years younger than Norah, and just three inches shorter. Her taut figure was as strong and clear in its outlines as her face; her chestnut hair deepened almost to the color miscalled red; her keen eyes contained a rather indefinable mixture of colors in which some people declared there was a shade of

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green—though why should not an eye be green! Her straight nose bore a few pleasant-looking freckles, left by the sun in a frolic; her chin was finely modeled, with perhaps rather too much determination about the mouth.

Mary comes and goes as she pleases to and from The Waterholes. She drives from Bringenbogie, her father's station twenty-five miles distant, in her handsome dogcart, or perhaps she rides over on her favorite thoroughbred—sometimes alone, sometimes attended by the neatest of small grooms. Always she does as she pleases.

Peter had heard much of her and of her beautiful voice, and was keenly interested to meet her.

The brothers chanced that morning to be erecting a split fence. Donald, dressed in his working clothes, with bare arms and neck, made a fine picture of physical energy as he swung his adze in driving home a rail, the buoyant ring of each blow carrying far through the forest.

Peter was the first to hear the tramp of the approaching horses, and as he looked up and saw Mary—it could of course be nobody else—he felt a whimsical wish that he had been more careful in choosing the stuff for the big patch on one knee of his trousers, and more careful also in the workmanship. "*I knew*

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I ought to have shaved this morning," was Donald's inward comment. But the patch and the scrubby chin were quickly forgotten in the interest of the meeting.

The brothers pressed their callers to stay for the midday meal, seeing that the hour was past noon.

"We're done for," whispered Peter to his brother, with a chuckle, as the party walked up to the hut. "What the dickens have we in the way of tucker?"

"That's all right," said Donald, who chanced to have done the housekeeping for the last couple of days. "There's a bit of steak left that we can grill. And we can boil some spuds, and rice, and run off an omelette—there are plenty of eggs. And damper and honey—what more do they want? Cream, too, be jingo," as he remembered that he had set a dish of milk that morning.

The brothers milked a cow or two, and kept a few fowls—a present from Mrs. Greentree. The fowls were something of the wildest, however.

"There's a tin of salmon somewhere," said Peter with an inspiration.

"That crowns it," cried Donald. "We're right now."

Soon a palatable meal, prepared midst a running fire of laughter and criticism, was ready, the two cooks declining all offers of help. Peter, too, slipped off to

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the creek and returned with an armful of dainty ferns and flowers, placing a large jugful—a crack cleverly concealed—in the center of the cloth. Nor did he fail to draw the attention of the guests to what he called the “poetic Moses’ rod legs” of the table. Made of Black Sally stakes driven into the earthen floor, they had sprouted with all the ardor of their kind.

That meal was a social event which will live in the memories of those who shared it long after much more important matters have escaped them. Health and beauty, hale old age and youth, laughter and merry argument, made a combination round the table that seemed one with the outdoor sunshine, and the bright spring day on an old land.

Mary in particular seemed to enjoy herself, as well she might, with her youth and health, her natural gifts and gifts of fortune. Wilful to a degree, and imperious or gracious as suited her mood, this youthful heiress was perilously attractive to most men. Nevertheless——

“I’m tired of men,” she remarked, at the close of a passage at arms with Peter on the old question of sex. “They are forever letting us know, with a kind of physical and moral cock-a-doodle-doo, that they are indeed lords of creation. Lucky for them that women, striking through their vanity, bring them down occa-

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sionally. Yet, I suppose," she continued reflectively, "we would hardly have them otherwise; we partly like men because they are so self-conceited, and when called upon are ready to rush into glory's grave if only for vanity's sake."

"Good," put in Peter. "Continue."

"Oh, we know you well," replied Mary. "We tell you you are deep, and you tingle all up the spine with pleasure. Oh, yes, you love to be called 'deep' by a woman. Every three years you pour out floods of talk and send into parliament, to vote for principles, men who often have no principles, and you think you rule the country. Yet we could do as we liked with you if we would only stoop to working on your vanity."

"But surely," said Norah, "mean vanity is not the moving spirit in men. And I must say I like a man with the pride of manhood upon him. Without it he is like a lion without a mane."

"Or a peacock without a tail," said Mary. "And yet I partly agree with you. Who'd be bothered with a faultless man—I mean a man who hasn't enough in him ever to go wrong, or very right, either. The soil that cannot grow a big rash fault, can't grow a big noble virtue. My dear young friends," holding up her hands, a fork in one of them with a potato on it, for Donald's potatoes were boiled in their jackets and

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smiled briskly through burst skins, "man is a farm. If the soil is good weeds will come thickly, and he must keep them down, and grow the rich crop nature intended him to grow. Norah, my child,"—here Mary laid down the fork—"if ever you take up a human selection be sure the soil is rich, even if there is a big thistle or two. It may pay to root them out at any cost if he is good enough otherwise. But whatever you do don't fix upon a sand-patch of a man, where the very weeds are poverty stricken. Such a selection isn't worth the cost of the improvements you have to put on it."

"I say, Dan, we must turn model farms, and appoint Miss MacKinnon overseer," said Peter. "What rare crops I'll grow to be sure—pumpkins of virtue and great moral cabbages. And if any weeds come I'll use them to enrich my soul's barley-paddock—hasn't somebody said that 'sin is the manure of virtue'? I reckon it is better to do without such manure though; it's nasty stuff to handle; so let virtue grow like a gum tree on a flat, with its roots deep in wholesome living."

Here Norah's demand for plain English introduced new matter into the talk, and it swung on vigorously into other themes.

After lunch the brothers with their guests settled comfortably in the grassy shade of a big hickory near at hand.

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Donald lay viewing the scene before him and listening to the chat, one elbow in the grass, his head resting on a hand. At the foot of the hill was a wattle-embowered slip-rail, and through it, away to the left, ran the track leading to The Waterholes. In the opposite direction flowed the creek, whose course was marked by stately river oaks. Over the flat along the nearer side of the creek were dotted a number of Donald's cattle, picking the luxuriant grass. Lazily there floated through his brain a fragment of song:—

*Well we love the rugged mountains with their features
stern and grand;
Well we love the noble forest fresh from Nature's
mighty hand;
But a stretch o' first-rate pasture, with the stock all
butter-fat
Dotted over—munchin' clover—where's the sight that
matches that?*

With infinite pleasure he surveyed the quiet scene, with its human foreground. Perhaps he as yet hardly realized how much of his pleasure was due to the fact that Norah formed part of the foreground. There she was, one with nature and the sunshine. Ah—the large delight of it all. Yet, with a feeling of keen regret for the sorry part he had played, there came a thought of

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Theresa. She seemed to have curiously passed out of his life.

His guests waited till the afternoon had cooled a little before leaving on their homeward ride. Part of the time was spent in strolling along the shady banks of the creek, hunting for a rare fern of which Norah wanted a root.

Then Boiler started a wallaby, which he utterly failed to catch. Mr. Conough's ridicule and Peter's prompt defense of the dog's powers, brought about a unique race. Mr. Conough gravely took off his coat, mounted his cob, and, riding at about sixteen stone, took up a position on the track leading to the hut. Peter, in his own fashion, explained to Boiler what was to be done, and the dog drew abreast of the cob with much eagerness.

"Ah, Boiler, you old cheat, you're a foot over the mark," shouted Mr. Conough. "Get back."

Boiler drew back guiltily, and then, thinking the signal was about to be given, darted up the track.

"False start, you old devil. Come back," roared his opponent.

Boiler pulled up, hesitated, then came back evidently under protest.

The two contestants drew up once more; Donald threw down his hat, and off they went. There was a

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vast amount of dust and exertion, and pounding and scratching of earth, but no alarming rate of speed. Peter yelled encouragement while Mr. Conough, plying the whip, rode for all the cob was worth. Norah and Mary, stationed as judges, one on each side of the track, declared the race to have ended in a dead heat, although so doubled up with laughter were they as to be hardly fit for their duty. Boiler, however, undoubtedly did not acquiesce in the decision, for as the cob walked away the dog heeled him like a flash, causing him to lash out in a manner that nearly unseated his unsuspecting rider.

Obviously it was too late to do any more fencing that afternoon. Donald and Peter decided that an evening at The Waterholes was much the best way of finishing the day.

As they rode off with their guests the whole place rang with laughter and jest, the comprehensive merriment of a time when old and young are young together.

Norah, full-lired and strong, put Fidget straight at the slip-rails. The mare took them cleanly, and Peter followed on his roan. Then Donald, not to be outdone, smashed fairly through the dry saplings. His obstreperous colt, head in air, never even saw them.

That evening at The Waterholes, while the others sat on the veranda, Mary sang to them. Apart from

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her singing no sound was heard, save occasionally the deep croaking of a frog, or the distant bellow of cattle, or the far-reaching murmur of Mr. Conough's bull on the warpath. And Mary sang, one after another, the songs of a past generation; old songs, those deep-hearted melodies and words, spirit and body, which obeying the great law of the survival of the fittest, have lived while others died. A great name, a great thought, a great song—these remain always.

When Mary paused in her singing Mr. Conough told stories, and with music and chat the hours passed away.

"Ah, yes," said the old man, as toward eleven o'clock he finished a stirring story of past years, "those days are gone forever. There are no bushrangers now, Pether, only bank directors. Would ye like some refreshment, me little b'ys?"

When the brothers were leaving Mr. Conough and the girls came to the front gate, Norah standing with one hand on the gate post and the other hand and arm round Mary, who returned her embrace girl-fashion.

"You must let me have a ride on that terrible Shylock of yours one of these days," said Norah to Donald.

"Well, he's the easiest goer I ever rode, like a rocking chair," replied Donald. "But he would strike in a

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minute, and kicks from pure love of it. He is a bit unapproachable to any one but myself."

"Oh, I can ride him all right."

"You're not going to thry, all the same," said Mr. Conough.

"We'll see, father," was the wilful reply.

Peter got up leisurely while Donald mounted quickly and quietly. Shylock went away at a run with his tail down and nose up. "You'd better be careful," was written plainly all over him.

The brothers disappeared down the track, and rode steadily and silently for a couple of miles. Donald's thoughts were busy, and ever and anon a great pair of gray eyes would flash across them. Peter's brain recalled again and again a voice ringing out in beauty on the still night. Suddenly by unspoken consent they put their horses to three-quarter speed, dashing along the rough track amongst the timber, nor did they draw rein, except at slip-rails, until the hut was reached. Very desolate, and dark within, and ghostlike it seemed in the pale light of the moon. Donald's words, when, entering with his saddle on his arm he stumbled over the meat block near the door, one stirrup iron raising a lump on the sharper edge of his shin, had a kind of rugged poetry about them.

A candle was lighted, and Donald set to work busily

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clearing the table, which had not been touched since lunch that day. Peter, usually so active, stood with his back to the rough mantel-shelf silently watching Donald at work. Full ten minutes Peter stood thus, then——

“Good job I washed the tablecloth last night, Dan,” said he, as Donald folded that article neatly, preparatory to putting it in the drawer of the safe.

Evidently tablecloths were not abundant in the home of the Southerdens.

CHAPTER V

"DAMN!"

The speaker was Peter; the speech sincere. Before him lay Boiler, body bandaged and off foreleg in splints.

The remark was uttered as Peter knelt and examined his patient; it expressed keenest sympathy—accepted with a brightened eye and a waggle of the tail—for a wounded friend; it rolled into one small bundle, conveniently labeled, all Peter's floating vexation because the bandage would not keep in position and the wounds did not look as right as they should have done; and it mentioned, in passing, what a nuisance it was to have so useful a helper as Boiler laid up.

Boiler's chief ambition in life was to catch a kangaroo. The "flyers" were utterly beyond him. But unfortunately for himself he occasionally started an "old man," much too majestic to run far. Boiler's speed was quite equal to coming up with a stationary object, but a kangaroo might rather be said to have caught him than he the kangaroo. And this is just

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what had happened—the particularly big “old man” inflicting wounds that exercised all Peter’s skill with needle and kangaroo tail sinews.

Then stiff and sore as he was, Boiler tried to heel Shylock as that large-headed colt approached too near the hut. The attempt ended in a broken foreleg.

Peter set the leg in splints, but Boiler made a restless patient, and nothing would remain long in position.

“What a nuisance he is, Dan,” said Peter, rising. “He’s been in more scrapes than any other dog I ever owned. The cattle seem to know he’s laid up, and I had no end of trouble with those steers this morning for want of the old villain. I say, are you coming over to The Waterholes for tea? I met Mr. Conough at Deep Creek, and promised to go, and take you if you could come. Jiminy, isn’t it hot!”

Peter pulled off his hat and held his arms out by way of trying to feel cool.

“Can’t go, I’m afraid,” replied Donald, working busily at a nut which refused to screw on its bolt. “Must fix the wagon for to-morrow morning, but I’ll ride over after tea. Don’t you wait for me. This is only a one-man job.”

“Think I’ll be off then. I’m going up the creek for a shot on my way.”

Ten minutes later Peter rode off with his gun under

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his arm. Donald, very dirty and very hot, exchanged a cheery word with him from under the wagon.

"Good-bye, Boiler, old man," Peter said as he passed that interesting invalid.

"Good-bye, Boss, old man. Take care of yourself," said Boiler in reply, speaking with his eyes and tail. Perhaps the most expressive of all speech comes from quite other organs than the tongue. With longing eyes the dog watched his master out of sight.

A couple of hours later Donald might have been seen with a razor in his hand fixing the buckle-end of a leather surcingle on a nail in a veranda post. He had no intention of inflicting grievous bodily harm upon himself, but was merely about to sharpen a razor, his regular strop being in too hacked a condition for the purpose.

Only lately had Donald developed a mania for frequent shaving. He had already shaved that morning, and at half-past six o'clock in the evening he was shaving again!

His frame of mind was satisfactory. In a few hours of energetic work he had accomplished what a slower man might well have considered a fair thing for two days. And although it had prevented his going to The Waterholes as early as he would have wished, yet he thought to himself that he would have a good shave

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and swim, then a pot of tea, and ride over comfortably afterwards.

So he sharpened his razor and shaved laboriously with the help of a stubbly brush and an ordinary piece of soap. The razor complained loudly as it rasped along the weatherbeaten chin. Shaving finished, boot-cleaning proceeded, foot on block and brush in each hand.

Then he started for the swimming-hole in the creek. But at the yard beside Shylock, whom Donald had half an hour ago caught, stood Peter's roan with no saddle on, and having one rein broken off at the bit. In a moment Donald was by him, looking for any marks that would indicate a fall, but found none. And as the old horse had a habit when loose of hopping over all the fences between him and his feeding place, nothing was to be inferred from his being found inside the home paddock.

Donald sent forth a prolonged *coo-ee* that echoed far and wide, and listened intently for a minute. There was no response. Somewhat anxiously he hurried Shylock to the hut, threw down his towel and soap, and got his saddle. Putting on a light coat he was soon trotting down the track leading to the slip-rails.

Before leaving he hesitated for a moment as to whether or not he should take Boiler. But the dog

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with all his bandages seemed so sore and unable to move that Donald decided to leave him behind. Peter might be all right, too, and would be vexed at Boiler's being taken on a hurried excursion which might mean the loss of his leg and the reopening of his severe wounds. So Donald rode away without him, and a piteous whine fell on his ears as he did so. At the slip-rails he again paused for a moment, considering whether he should ride straight to The Waterholes or first take a look up the creek where Peter had said he was going. He knew that the old roan had a touch of sore back from a sweat boil, and that Peter would probably pull the saddle off him to wash his back, and perhaps tie him up. If that were so he might have broken away without the saddle, and Peter would be at The Waterholes. But all this was hardly probable.

Donald decided to ride up the creek for a mile, get through the fence there and go on to The Waterholes by a back-track which Peter, had he gone up the creek, would have been almost sure to take. He set off at a trot, keeping a careful lookout, and reining in every hundred yards to coo-ee and listen. Soon he reached the spot where he and Peter usually got out of the paddock when going that way. Riding down into the creek, where there was a panel or two of rough cockatoo

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fencing, he pulled off a rail and led Shylock over. He inspected the fence to the right for a hundred yards or so, knowing that Peter, when in a lazy mood, frequently put the roan over it to save trouble. The inspection proved fruitless, and Donald quickly covered the distance between him and The Waterholes.

The Conoughs had just finished tea. Mary was there, but not Peter, and a lump rose in Donald's throat. Anxious explanations followed, and in five minutes Donald, on the foaming Shylock, had run up the horses. Briefly he gave his directions, with Mr. Conough's approval. Mr. Conough with his dog and the only lantern that was to hand, would accompany him and ride by the back creek, and search both thoroughly. Miss Conough—for Norah refused to stay at home—and Old Billy would ride, taking Billy's dog, by the ordinary track to the hut, and see if Peter had arrived there, then follow up the creek and let Donald know the result. Miss MacKinnon would stay at home and have hot water and other things ready in case of necessity.

"I'll be all right," said Mary cheerily.

Then horses were mounted. The evening grew more and more oppressive, and not far away the black mass of lightning-illuminated clouds threw an uncertain light over all things.

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"That storm will be up in half an hour," said Mr. Conough with an anxious glance around. No more was said, and Mary watched four horses and their riders disappear down the darkening tracks—the night was closing in quickly by reason of the clouds.

Straining their eyes into the dim mixture of setting moonlight and lingering day which struggled through the treetops, Norah and Old Billy rode rapidly and silently, except when they occasionally paused for a moment to coo-ee and listen, until the hut was reached. Peter was not there. A profound hush, broken only by their calls and the rumbling of distant thunder striving to break loose, reigned everywhere. Anxiously they searched all round the hut and yard and horse paddock—but did not find Peter.

"You ride up the creek and tell them, Billy, and I will search the flat to the left. Mr. Peter often goes that way for a shot."

Old Billy hesitated, then obeyed. He had profound confidence in his young mistress and her powers of taking care of herself.

As he rode away Norah took a last look round and was also about leaving when a low wail from Boiler caught her ear. In a moment she was beside the dog, who welcomed her eagerly.

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"Perhaps," she thought, "he may be able to come. I will go very slowly and let him do as he likes. He would be worth a dozen of us."

She undid the chain at the collar. With his battle-torn ears laid back Boiler raised himself eagerly on his hind legs, putting one paw on Norah's knee while his tail and eyes expressed his gratitude. In another second, dropping on his three sound legs, he set off without hesitation toward the slip-rails. Norah swung herself upon Fidget and followed. Through the open slip-rails they went, and Boiler, slowly and painfully at first, but faster as the exercise thawed his stiffness, toiled bravely along the track leading direct to The Waterholes. In the dim moonlight, aided by the lightning, Norah with her quick eyes had no difficulty in keeping him in view. It was curious, when a flash came, to see the vast dust he raised as he threw his hind legs out each side of him, a peculiarity of his when at full speed that caused many a laugh.

Soon the boundary gate was reached and passed, and still the old dog labored on strongly and without hesitation toward The Waterholes. For a moment Norah thought he might be at fault. But Boiler obstinately refused to come back, so she decided to follow his lead to the end. When within a quarter of a mile of the outer gate the lightning revealed Boiler looking

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eagerly back to her before he hopped into the bush to the left, in a direct line for the house instead of going by the gate. Norah could not understand this move, but followed unhesitatingly. The perspiration gathered on her face, and her light blouse clung to her chest and arms. She had had no time to put on a habit, and was riding in her ordinary dress. Fidget was equally hot, and pulled strongly as she took the bush.

In five minutes more the massive two-railed split fence, which Mr. Conough and Old Billy had recently put up along the front boundary of the selection, was reached. A vivid flash showed Boiler just through the fence crouching by some dark object. Norah sprang from Fidget, threw her reins over a post, and was by Boiler's side in an instant. She found him licking Peter's face. Kneeling, she quickly raised the unconscious head, while a great sob rose in her throat. The face, covered with clotted blood, and with the teeth clenched, looked positively awful when seen under the lightning. Norah, thrusting her hand into Peter's breast, felt anxiously for his heart, and was overjoyed to find that it beat faintly. Then a prolonged blaze of lightning revealed a strange thing. Not six feet away and with his body half-raised, was a large snake making off, hissing faintly as he went. Norah shuddered, but

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Boiler with a low growl sprang forward, and in a few dark breathless seconds added number twenty-five to his known record in snakes.

Norah coo-eed with all the strength of her grand lungs, and to her delight was answered by another coo-ee from along the fence not a hundred yards away. In two minutes more Mary was with her, and found her with a pocket flask, making the common mistake of trying to put a little brandy and water into an unconscious man's mouth.

Now Mary had been left at home feeling a little hurt that she was not allowed to join the search party, but she knew that it was right for her to stay. So she boiled water, got a bed ready, set out brandy and a glass and a quantity of old linen in case it should be needed for bandages, and did everything else she could think of that might be useful. Then she stood at the front gate gazing into the alternate darkness and light of that anxious night until she could bear it no longer. Leaving a penciled memorandum on the table that she would be back in half an hour, she started out on foot. Knowing Peter's weakness for jumping, and heedless of snakes and storm, she carefully explored all that part of the fence where he could come through had he taken the course mentioned to Donald when leaving home. Afterward she followed along toward the

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direct road from the hut, and would probably have found Peter in another ten minutes.

The first thing to do was to get him home. Mary quickly procured a strong dry sapling which had been cut down when the fence was being made. Breaking off the end she left the sapling seven feet long. Norah got another by climbing it and swinging herself out as she reached the top. The sapling bent as Norah swung out vigorously, and, with a crack, gave where it had been lately ring-barked, and came to earth. Norah broke off the branches and top, and with the help of the lightning she and Mary quickly laid pieces of stick and then bushes and bark across the saplings placed parallel two-feet-six apart. In three minutes they had a comfortable, reliable litter prepared. With tender care Peter was placed on it, and steadily and sturdily the girls walked home with their burden, Boiler limping painfully at his master's side.

After a hasty inspection for snakebite, though the girls had little fear of that on account of his having lain so motionless, efforts were made to restore Peter's consciousness.

Quickly they undressed him, and found his head, shoulder and right side badly bruised and swollen, and a nasty gash in his right leg. They set to work applying cold wet cloths to his head, hot water bottles to his

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feet, and carefully dressing his hurts—Mary showing herself an expert, for she had gone through an ambulance course. Norah helped with deft intelligence.

When after a little time there was no sign of returning consciousness, Mary said, "Please ride as fast as you can and tell the others. We must have a doctor without delay. I can do everything here." She looked very sturdy and capable, though anxious and somewhat pale.

"I will send some one for a doctor or go myself," said Norah. "Fidget is twice as fast as any of their horses."

Boiler was lying on the floor beside the bed in a pool of his own blood. The wound on his ribs and the deeper one on his chest were bleeding again, and he was holding his broken leg painfully off the floor. Norah bent hastily and kissed the scarred forehead while her eyes filled with tears.

"I will attend to him," said Mary, handing Norah a mackintosh. Norah took it, then ran all the way, stumbling over bushes and stumps, to the spot where Fidget was tied. The darkness, broken only by lightning, was intense, and the thunder rumbled almost continuously, as if the storm were working up its rage before hurling itself along the countryside.

Quickly Norah put on the coat, mounted, and trot-



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ting steadily till she reached the track, broke into a gallop.

Suddenly the lightning flashed far and wide more blindingly than it had yet done, and the thunder bel-
lowed threateningly over hill and valley. First came one, two, three great drops. Then a deluge battered the ground, and in spite of the mackintosh Norah could feel cold water trickling down her back and chest. From the knees downward she was drenched. In her heated state it was quite a relief. Setting her teeth and bowing her head, she gave Fidget the rein and let her take her own course. The mare went through the blinding storm at a mad rate, and did the four miles to Donald's boundary gate under a quarter of an hour. She splashed through the open gate, and was dashing along the track to the hut when the lightning revealed to Norah a horseman fifty yards to the left. Fidget slipped and kept her feet with a struggle as Norah reined her in and wheeled her round suddenly.

"Is that you, Miss Norah?" came Old Billy's voice.

"Yes, Billy," she shouted through the blackness.

The thunder pealed out and nothing else could be heard. Norah moved toward the spot where the apparition had appeared. In a moment another flash showed that Billy had come to within a yard of her without either of them knowing it. Fidget did not

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move, but Billy's horse snorted and wheeled away, and out of the darkness Norah heard much stamping and crackling of sticks.

"Mr. Donald told me to ride up this flat and find you and get you to go home, and then for me to ride like hell to Deep Creek for help," said Old Billy literally. More sounds of splashing and stamping, and some bad words, for Billy's mind was too occupied to keep guard over his tongue.

"He was afraid if Mr. Peter was near any creek the water might drown'd 'im." Once more the lightning blazed out over two dripping, half-blinded specters. Then Norah's contralto rose clear above the beat of the rain.

"Ride back to father and Mr. Southerden and tell them Mr. Peter has been found and is at The Water-holes alive, and to ride straight there." Her heart sank as she said the word "alive."

"Thank Gawd. For Gawd's sake go straight home, darlin'," said Billy earnestly.

"I'm all right," replied Norah, who was inwardly debating whether she should send Billy for the doctor while she found her father and Donald, or go for the doctor herself and let Billy find them. But Billy had had a long day and was tired, his horse was young and untried, and Norah knew the way to Eurimbyn well,

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and so did Fidget, the dauntless. Norah decided to go herself. Two minutes later she was splashing along at a three-quarter gallop through half a foot of water below and a streaming torrent overhead. She passed the Deep Creek public house at a rapid rate, and five of the twenty-six miles were behind her. Suddenly, with a roar and a great blaze of light, a gum tree a hundred yards ahead was struck into splinters by the lightning, and pieces whizzed past her. She cried out involuntarily, and Fidget, being like her mistress, blinded and bewildered for the moment, wheeled sharply round. The saddle half-turned, and with it nearly on Fidget's ribs, Norah was quite unable to pull up for two hundred yards or more. She brought the frightened mare to a standstill against the fence which there bounded one side of the road, and slipped off, fondling the wet neck and speaking in a reassuring tone. With trembling fingers she felt for and undid the girths, fixed the saddle, and once more mounted.

Fidget picked her way with rapid nervous steps back toward Eurimbyn, her dripping tail hanging between her hocks, while she snorted suspiciously with her nose down. But soon Norah urged her on once more at a rapid canter, and quickly reached the Deep Creek crossing. Norah had been dreading this crossing all the way, and now the lightning with its abating force

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showed that the creek was nearly a banker. In the same instant, with no thought of stopping, Norah decided that she would enter as far as possible to the right, so that the mare might reach the other side before the current, which ran to the left, could carry her past the crossing altogether. She urged Fidget carefully forward, and the mare went in without hesitation. The water was just over her back, and she touched bottom at every plunge, while Norah was wet to the hips. Snorting, Fidget battled with all her strength and fiery courage against the strong current, and with a great struggle gained the opposite bank with not a yard to spare, and dashed onward into the night. Without further mishap the remaining miles of sloppy roads were passed, and the night was clear and starlit when Fidget's hoofs rang out on the metal of the main street of Eurimbyn, the houses echoing loudly to her tread. The principal store and hotel, in which latter lights were burning, were passed, and Norah, directed by a man dimly visible in the dark who stared curiously after her, found her way to Doctor McLennon's house. She slipped off stiff and cramped, and rang the doctor's bell under two hours after leaving Donald's gate. The night had cooled a great deal, and in her wet condition she felt it very severely.

The doctor, a brawny young Scotchman who had

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only recently come to the colonies, himself answered her vigorous ring, and looked in surprise at the mud-covered girl before him, with her white face, and big eyes, and wet hair tumbling on her shoulders. He at once called his wife, who appeared in a wrapper thrown hurriedly on. Norah told her story briefly, and the doctor said nothing but quickly prepared a glass of whiskey and water, while his wife hastened to get a cup of tea ready, and to put out some of her own dry clothes. Meanwhile at Norah's request, and under her personal supervision, Fidget was taken to the stable, and the doctor's groom went to work with a will to give her a twenty-minutes' rub-down. But now the grave young Scotchman explained to Norah that one of his horses was sick and unfit to travel, he did not know where he could get another, and had no shafts for his buggy but only a pole.

"Ride," said Norah at once. "It would be almost impossible to drive there to-night."

And the doctor forthwith decided to ride, and gave orders for saddling, although he had been on a horse only three times in his life. A new difficulty occurred to him. He did not know the road, and had no horse for his groom. "Would the mare stand the return journey?"

Thereupon Norah declared, notwithstanding his re-

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monstrances, that she was going back herself. He had already had a stiff brush with her about going to the stable with Fidget instead of at once changing her clothes, and now, looking at the strong young figure before him, he decided to let Norah have her own way.

"I couldn't stay, Doctor," she pleaded.

So they returned to the house, where Mrs. McLennon wanted Norah to have a warm bath and go to bed; but the kind-hearted pair found it was useless trying to persuade this obstinate damp girl to do as they wished. To please them Norah put on the dry clothes, dried her hair as well as the thick masses would permit in the space of five minutes, drank two cups of strong tea, and half an hour after her arrival at the house was on the return journey with the doctor. The latter carried a small bag containing necessary instruments and bandages. As he bumped along beside Norah on his fresh horse, with his trousers up to his knees, the bag was often in great peril. Norah begged to have the custody of it. This the doctor refused, declaring he could manage. So the pair traveled rapidly along, Norah in an agony of fear for the bag. At the end of five miles she managed to get possession of it on the pretense of giving the doctor's arm a rest, and positively refused to return it. Indeed, the doctor found good use for his spare hand in holding on to the pommel.

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Suddenly his horse shied sharply at a culvert, and in a twinkling the doctor came on his back in a puddle with a mighty splash, but stuck manfully to the reins.

"I'm not hurt," he shouted cheerily, struggling to his feet while his horse pulled violently. When he was quieted his rider tried to get on with the wrong foot in the stirrup, and failed ignominiously, nor could Norah see what he was doing in the dark.

"Try the fence," she suggested. With its aid the doctor succeeded in flopping heavily into the saddle. It was dawning dimly as they reached Deep Creek, and the stream had fallen appreciably since Norah crossed before. The water reached only to the saddle flap, and she had no difficulty in keeping herself and the precious bag dry. Then she looked around for the doctor. He urged his horse on, but the animal by no means relished taking the water. The doctor kicked him vigorously, and he swerved up the creek, nearly unseating his rider, got on the steep bank above the crossing and tried to climb it, but failed and slid sideways with much floundering into a deep place, and both he and the doctor disappeared. Two seconds later there was a great splashing and spluttering.

"Keep clear of that brute," shouted Norah.

The doctor proved a magnificent swimmer, and the chilly bath ended in his climbing hatless out of the

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creek beside Norah, while his horse, getting out on the other side, started back toward Eurimbyn at top speed.

"Good thing I had the bag," remarked Norah quietly.

"Yes, but what's to be done now," said the doctor as he wrung his clothes.

"Jump on behind," replied Norah.

She rode up close to the fence, the doctor scrambled on behind her, and Fidget bounded away apparently with little regard for the extra twelve stone. The doctor clung with all his might, feeling that his position was a dreadfully precarious one, but he said nothing. At the end of a mile they met Old Billy coming at a gallop on Shylock.

"How could you, Miss Norah," were his first reproachful words, uttered in a tone of deep concern.

Quickly saddles were changed. Norah directed Billy to walk as far as Deep Creek, borrow a horse there, and also send a message to Mrs. McLennon lest she should be alarmed by the return of the doctor's horse.

Then Fidget and Shylock, the latter carrying Norah like a lamb, made the pace so good that within an hour the doctor was beside his patient.

CHAPTER VI

WHO so welcome as the doctor when a battle for life is being waged in a lonely spot in the bush! All night long had the three watchers kept by Peter, anxiously doing all that in their judgment would restore him to consciousness.

Doctor McLennon's arrival put fresh heart into them. Mary had a warm breakfast ready, but cheery and confident he threw off his coat, stretched his stiffened limbs with a wince or two as his clothes chafed the sore spots, gulped down a glass of hot whiskey, and set about his serious work. Peter had partly recovered consciousness, but held Donald's hand in a strong grip, moaning distressfully at any attempt to disengage it. But the doctor's verdict was in favor of recovery.

"He has had a terrible blow on the head, and some ribs are broken, and there are no end of bruises. But I am beginning to know these bushmen, and things like these won't kill them. They're a rare, tough lot."

This was distinctly cheering, and Donald's face became five years younger. He looked across at Norah.

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"I haven't thanked you yet; how shall I thank you enough, Miss Conough?" he said simply.

"Oh, just praise me," said Norah with a smile. "The doctor has given me full measure. I can always do pretty well if I am praised enough."

"You and Miss MacKinnon did more than all the rest of us put together last night."

"Miss MacKinnon is one of Nature's nurses," put in Doctor McLennon. "So cool and ready, with quick intelligence that sees just the right thing. Your brother will owe a lot to her manipulation of those bruises and cuts last night."

"He will be keen to acknowledge the debt," said Donald.

Upon his return to The Waterholes after receiving Norah's message on the previous night, Donald, thinking of the flooded creek and of the stormy road to Eurimbyn, had been very anxious for her safety. But Mr. Conough reassured him.

"She can take care of herself, that little gir-r-l of mine—she's well on her return journey by this," said the old man cheerily. "She is of her mother's blood. And her father's," he added in an undertone, so that the others did not hear him, and his eyes had a far-away look in them for a moment. Then forthwith he dispatched Billy after Norah, knowing that with his

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light weight and keen anxiety for the safety of his young mistress Billy would press forward faster than he himself could.

Doctor McLennon, notwithstanding his cheeriness, would not leave Peter's side for a couple of days, and afterward returned repeatedly until danger was past. There was another patient, too, one with whom the sympathy of the whole household rested. This was Boiler. The doctor dressed his wounds with skillful care, but could not save the shattered foreleg, which was accordingly amputated. Boiler bore the operation with hardly a whimper. Hitherto he had acknowledged no friendship except that with his master, and an underhand sort of regard for Donald. But now he became fast friends with the doctor, and bore himself with familiar courtesy to everybody. The surest test of his friendship for Doctor McLennon, however, came when the latter, profiting by his spare time at The Water-holes, practiced the art of riding on a quiet old hack, with Norah as instructress. Boiler, especially when his wounds grew better, must have been keenly tempted many times, but not once did he heel the doctor's horse. Most of his time, however, was by special permission spent on a mat at his master's door, until the latter also grew well again.

Convalescent at last! Peter, when at the end of three

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weeks he was moved carefully into the veranda, his head and his body still more or less bound up, declared that he had never before in his life felt so interesting.

"The short cut I took that night has brought several people by a very short cut to my heart, it seems to me," he said with a laugh.

He had once or twice on previous occasions taken a quick way over the fence to Mr. Conough's house. All he remembered about his last attempt was that his roan, a splendid jumper though rather inclined to rush, slipped badly on some bark when taking off. He must have fallen into the fence, which was a good deal strained. Peter's girth, a disgracefully old one neatly mended by its happy-go-lucky owner, had given with the shock, and saddle and gun, the latter undischarged, were both picked up at the spot where he had been found lying.

Very pleasant it was, when he became stronger and free from pain, for Peter to receive, and note in receiving, the gentle care that was so freely bestowed upon him; to see Norah coming into his room like some light-footed emissary of spring; to listen by the hour to Mary's songs—sung softly for his benefit. Every day Norah became more and more a comrade and sister to him; every day Mary became more and more to him in a different way.

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Christmas day drew round. Early in the morning Donald was out after cattle that had got away. He rode for a couple of hours without finding them, and as his ride took him near The Waterholes he decided to go there for breakfast. He tied Shylock to the usual paling, for every day since Peter's accident he had been there. Shylock already knew his paling and went to it unasked. There is no surer way of finding out where a man is in the habit of calling, than by borrowing his horse and riding in the neighborhood suspected. The unsuspecting animal will surely turn in at the right place, and if given a loose rein, will show the very spot where his master usually ties him.

Donald exchanged greetings with Mary, who had come to spend Christmas at The Waterholes. Norah, she said, was in the milking yard. Old Billy had a bad hand, and Mr. Conough had stayed overnight in Eurimbyn, and probably would not be home till near midday, so Norah must perforce milk.

Donald went straight to the yard, and as he approached heard the busy hum indicative of a strong milker. There sat Norah, clad in a simple close-fitting fashion which set off her figure well. Her neat, strong boots were well adapted to rough work, and an old-fashioned sunbonnet protected her face from the sun. Over her lap was spread a canvas apron to keep her

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dress free from spots, and between her knees rested a tin bucket into which the milk flew from her supple hands. She was whistling softly in accompaniment to the sound of the falling milk. Round the yard stood five cows besides the one in the bail, all in their accustomed places, for cows take up regular standing places when they are not cramped for room. Donald tried to steal upon Norah unawares, but her ears were too quick for him.

"Ah, I see you," and a pair of gray eyes danced in the depths of the bonnet. Then a damp right hand was held out to him, which he grasped with gentle strength. But as Norah turned round again her long bonnet tickled the cow, and a vicious kick followed.

"Whoa, you nasty old thing," exclaimed Norah. "You've jabbed all the milk up with the froth. Billy should teach her manners, should he not?" to Donald. "But it is really your fault, Mr. Southerden, and you've spoilt my froth. I was going to heap it, too," she added complainingly.

"Let me finish milking for you."

"I will, because I know it will please you to help me. But I want to see how high I can froth this first."

She milked steadily and strongly, while the froth gradually rose. It reached the top of the bucket, it

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rose half an inch, a whole inch, above it, and hung trembling in snowy rolls over the edges.

"Isn't it lovely," cried Norah, leaning back for a better view. Then she took the strippings from the cow, and just as she had finished, the whole trembling mass heaved its luxuriant whiteness over the edge of the bucket and rolled lazily on to her apron and the ground.

"Ah-h," sighed Norah.

"Such is life," said Donald, who had been watching with keen enjoyment, standing back a little so that he might the better take in all the pleasure that Norah's grace and beauty gave him. He took the small bucket and emptied the milk into a larger one, pulled the leg rope off the cow, let her out, and bailed up the next. Then he seated himself, and from his powerful hands the milk for a moment lashed the bottom of the bucket into music which deepened in tone as the white froth rose, but ceased suddenly, for the cow had not yet let down properly.

"Do you know, Miss Conough," said Donald presently, enjoying the sensation of feeling the milk, which the cow was just beginning to let down freely, flooding the teats and bulging out the lower parts of the udder, "I am glad you understand all these things and can do them. I think," he went on slowly, and gazing into

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the fast-filling bucket, "that the knowledge of them gives one a keener and, shall I say, more loving interest in the homely things that make life so enjoyable. I have few keener pleasures than those I draw from the higher animals. And by the higher animals I mean, in particular, well-bred horses, cattle and sheep, and good dogs—not the little rubbish with a ribbon on, nor the big, bleary-eyed sheep killers that townspeople make a fuss about."

To sheep owners, or those who have been sheep owners, there are, roughly speaking, two classes of dogs—those that kill sheep, and those that don't. And Donald's father, aided by his sons, had five years earlier been one of the prosperous sheep owners of New South Wales. But droughts and other evils attendant on grazing, combined with his now free-handedness, had crippled him financially to such an extent that on his death his sons found themselves with scarcely six hundred pounds between them, to which must be added their personal belongings and a few favorite horses.

"How about pigs and fowls!" said Norah, continuing.

"Oh, you can put them in somewhere. The grunt of a fat, well-bred pig is lazily comforting, and a fight between two vindictive clucking hens, while their chickens scatter, is exhilarating and awakens latent philosophy."

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"And cats?" queried Norah.

"Never," was the reply.

A pause.

"Mr. Southerden," said Norah presently, "do you remember the first day we met—at the creek."

"Yes, I remember," murmured Donald, gazing out across the sunlit paddocks, and milking busily.

"Well," said Norah, plucking a splinter from the post, "I thought to myself that day, 'What a splendid bullock driver he is!' and it pleased me immensely.

Donald laughed.

"Don't you know that the pride of an Australian is to be independent of dependents, to be able to do everything better than his man," said he, with a masterful light in his eyes.

"I agree with you," said Norah reflectively, "and I think the same thing applies to a girl Australian."

When milking was finished Donald felt quite ready for breakfast, for he was not the type of man who, because he may love, cannot also eat. Love may be based upon the noblest that is in man, yet well-cooked food of the solid British type is a great mainstay. Doubtless there are cases where particular individuals have been known to live on little else but love for quite a long time, but it is like living on a fever—very wasting.

After breakfast Donald once more set off after his

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cattle, which being strangers had lost no time in making for their old run miles away. He therefore missed the merry Christmas dinner at The Waterholes, for he was not the man to return empty-handed from his quest, whatever his inclination. Very pleasant he found it after his long hot day, and after a bath and a tea befitting a man who had missed his dinner, to sit on the veranda in the cooling air, and watch the sunset. Near by him sat Peter, now little the worse for the accident. Convalescence flowed like rich wine through his veins. And, though he scarcely realized it himself, a new, strange wine quickened his pulse as Mary's slight figure stood out clearly in the glow of the dying sunset on the garden.

Mr. Conough's dwelling, a neat, inexpensive, weather-board cottage of six rooms, hall and kitchen, with convenient fittings such as plainly evidenced the presence of a man who knew how to handle tools, was situated near the bank of one of the deep, long waterholes from which the selection took its name. As the sun sank on that Christmas evening Donald passed through one of those moments which remain with men long years after, like the memory of some rainbow in childhood. By him were Mr. Conough and his brother, and at his feet lay Boiler, a scarred warrior at rest. In the garden were Norah and Mary, while on the distant hills the

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rays of the setting sun, stretched out like gracious hands in benediction, covered the gum tree tops with glory.

The sun throbbed out of sight, and the hills became a black outline against the clear evening sky. Then they, too, gradually faded.

As the darkness closed in, Norah went to her piano and played soft Christmas music. *Adeste Fideles* stole from beneath her fingers, and Mary's voice rang out in accompaniment. The others joined in and the stirring old hymn floated far across the waterhole.

Donald sat very quiet after the hymn was finished. The voices of those around him became as a hum while his thoughts wandered back nearly nineteen hundred years, wondering over the glory of that deep Eastern night, and musing on the simple shepherds who were privileged to take part in so memorable a scene. And through all his musings the voice and presence of Norah filled him with infinite pleasure and content. He knew that henceforth this woman, whether she ever married him or not, must fill a place in his life that no other could fill. He would tell her of his love, but not yet. He would wait a little to see how his worldly affairs prospered, as he had no right to ask her to be his wife when he could not offer her a home. If the affair of the promissory note turned out all right—it

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would be settled before very long—then he would be able to keep his selection and would have no fear on the score of means.

At ten o'clock, Peter having been safely put to bed, Donald said good night, and followed by a hearty "Gahd bless ye, me little b'y," from Mr. Conough, rode slowly away through the starlight.

CHAPTER VII

AS the days went on, Peter Southerden grew rapidly well in body, but unusually restless in mind. A bushman all his life, and a light-hearted one at that, he had been accustomed to taking things as they came, sturdily setting his face against incipient discontent. Now, however, he found himself not a little inclined to indulge in the relief of a good hearty kick against the pricks. He had very little money, and a great deal of pride. But he was as yet hardly prepared to admit that these facts, combined with the fact that Mary MacKinnon had a very great deal of money, were the sources of the discontent which had entered into him. Never before had the meaning of want of money come so fully upon him, and realizing that meaning to the full, perhaps he preferred to think that his discontent arose from a general revolt of his nature against that sordid man-eater—Poverty.

Mary was to return home the day after Christmas, and Peter, contemplating her departure and the fact that it would be almost a relief to have her go, was in what may best be described as a savagely cheerful frame of mind.

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Then Mary pressed him to accompany her, and to stay at Bringenbogie for as long a time as he could manage. Forthwith closing his mind to everything but the exasperating pleasure of seeing her, he decided to accept the invitation for a week at all events, and the savage element, rather to his own amusement, straightway departed from his cheerfulness.

So to Bringenbogie he went, and the week passed pleasantly and rapidly. Mr. MacKinnon was a small, dare-devil, dark man, with closely trimmed, pointed beard turning gray, and the determined expression which he had imparted to his daughter. He had abundance of humor and energy, and an equally abundant income. It was whispered that his wife and he were barely friends; that she, formerly a brilliant society belle, had wanted to marry a man of small means, but bowing to Manimón in the joint shapes of a worldly-wise mother and her fashionable friends, had married in accordance with the ideas in which she had been trained. It was said that this union had resulted in a comfortably unhappy life for her and her husband; that Mary, fond of her father, received from her mother scant attention, and that if there were any affection at all, it was effectually hidden under a manner silent and chilling.

These things, however, did not appear to the casual

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guest, and there was no more pleasant house to stay in throughout all that wide-spreading district.

Nevertheless Peter's unrest soon returned in a two-fold degree, and he began to think that the less time he spent at Bringenbogie the better. Half in laughter, but quite frankly, he now admitted to himself that Mary, or rather the fact that he saw no prospect of ever being nearer to her than he was at that moment, was the cause of his disquiet. The exasperating sense of impotence, quite foreign to him, and due wholly to his lack of money, became almost intolerable.

He made up his mind that hard work was the best thing for him, and decided to return to the selection. But next day, New Year's Day, had for years past been celebrated at Bringenbogie by the holding of picnic races. A ball, held in the large hall in Eurimbyn, invariably followed the races notwithstanding the warm weather. For it was not often that so large a gathering came together, and everybody was bent on making the most of it. The MacKinnons, of course, had a full house, composed of visitors from distant places, even so far away as Sydney, and on the present occasion, much to Peter's pleasure, the guests included the Conoughs and Donald.

The races were held in one of the Bringenbogie paddocks, and Peter occupied a seat near Mary as Mr.

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MacKinnon's fine team, finely handled by their owner, dashed through the brown paddocks to the course. On sped the drag, leaving behind many a grand bullock with "Who the devil are you!" written upon his astonished countenance. Mary looked particularly bright as her auburn hair caught the breeze and sunlight, and she talked gaily to those around her. But for the rest of the day Peter saw little of her, and indeed almost forgot her for a time in the interest excited by intercourse with his kind.

She, however, appeared to be specially, if somewhat restlessly, happy, chatting and laughing with friends, trying her luck on a spinning jinny, betting freely, and generally misbehaving herself, as unostentatiously as possible, indeed, but with an habitual, though unconscious, disregard for the opinions of others.

In the evening Mr. MacKinnon's drag again bowled away, towards Eurimbyn this time, carrying a number of daintily dressed maidens and as many men. Mary, dressed all in white, appeared in the ballroom on Mr. Conough's arm. Of all her men friends she seemed to place him first. Norah, with her dark and gracious beauty, was also beside the old man, and all eyes in the hall turned toward this sufficiently striking trio.

Five minutes later the first dance began, and Norah

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noted the pleasure in Donald's eyes as he approached her to claim it.

"Will I do?" she said, with a little laugh, standing very straight as she adjusted a bangle preparatory to moving off with him.

"Do!" murmured Donald, far away, "You'll *out*-do."

Then seeing Norah's color heighten slightly he recalled himself to himself.

"But you scarcely place any value on a rough bushman's opinion as to your appearance," he added quickly.

"Yes, I do," replied Norah. "It gives me real pleasure to look well in the eyes of a kind man-friend like you."

"That is a wholesome impulse," replied Donald. "But you have more reasons than that for liking to be well-dressed!"

"Yes, it is part of my religion, I think," she replied simply. "It is an absolute duty to look as well as one can, whether woman or man."

After a few turns they reached the entrance to an improvised conservatory.

"Let us go in here," said Donald. It appears to me that you have the best of us to-night. You are not only cool, but look cool, which is a great point."

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Just then a tall, thin woman in a very low-necked dress passed by.

"She certainly looks cool," added Donald, with a laugh. "Those bones are good bones enough, but why doesn't she cover them? They do stare upon me. That sort of thing hurts a man."

"It does hurt," replied Norah. "But you must let charity be the covering."

"Charity! Surely I am charitable when I advocate the proper clothing of the poor! Now, there goes another woman whose clothes appear to have been thrown at her."

"Ah, you mustn't be so hard. That woman is as kind as she is careless. And I really think I prefer women who are careless in dress to those who, quite forgetting that art isn't artfulness, overdo it."

"Hello, you two, I've found you at last!" and Peter appeared in the doorway near where they were sitting.

"Oh, here's Peter for his dance," said Norah. She had learned to call him by his Christian name. "You can 'Mister' Dan, if you like, but call me Peter," said he one day, and so it was settled.

"Been looking all over the place for you, and got into no end of trouble. I have just fled from two people I stumbled on, leaving them all unconscious of my pres-

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ence, and the youth was muttering something about 'the ruddy drops that visited his sad heart!'"

"Oh, come along, you bad boy," said Norah.

Their *vis-à-vis* in the ensuing lancers were Mr. Conough with Mary for a partner. With his towering frame, white hair, and rugged kind face Mr. Conough formed a decidedly pleasant sight, and was enjoying himself like a schoolboy. Mary looked a mere dot beside him—a very alert, intelligent and attractive dot. She flirted dreadfully all night, and bantered and goaded her partners to their wits' end.

Swiftly the hours wore on, everybody apparently very happy, and unmistakably very hot. By and by Mary sang, and the hall held its collective breath to listen. Peter sat beside his then partner—a pretty girl with fine violet eyes and a weakish chin—watching Mary with a kind of savage pain at his heart. "Was she not the richest heiress in the district, and he a poor devil of a selector?" his thoughts ran on. "Yet why should a few beggarly thousands of pounds stand in the way of a man's love, overbalancing that which was worth all the gold in the universe! It was just the infernal conventional way in which things were looked at in this world, putting aside their true value altogether." He groaned inwardly as he felt that this particular conventionality was too strong for him. "But after all,"

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he thought, "it was treating a girl with little respect to believe that she would permit such a thing as money to stand between her and the man she loved, and yet it was putting a high value on one's worthless self" (bitterly), "to ask her to go so much in the teeth of the world's ideas as to marry a pauper." For a moment he wished her wealth were at the bottom of the sea, then called himself an ass, and vague visions of giving up his C. P. and clearing out to make his fortune in speculating, gold-mining, or some other impracticable way, floated through his brain. Then he would return and—here the song ended and the tongues began, and Peter once more wrote himself down an ass. For how, handicapped out of the running, unable, indeed, even to enter for the race, could he hope to win the bright being standing by the piano, surrounded by handsome, rich, and clever admirers. The ballad she had sung was an old one—something about the sea. Mary had a weakness for old ballads, and threw into them a charm that brought them to her hearers with renewed freshness, and left them wondering at the revelation of beauty that had so long escaped them.

"Well, have you nothing to say?" asked Peter's partner presently, for his thoughts were far away, and anywhere but on his tongue.

"It's hot," replied he.

"Imagine a man beginning to talk about the weather after music like that."

"And why not?" answered Peter. "The weather's the most important subject we have. The good of the colony depends on it. It is proper that we should always begin our conversation with a little thank-offering to it—in this case taking the form of a grace before the substantial intellectual meal one naturally expects when entering into conversation with a modern young lady."

"How grandiloquent you are! I'm afraid you'll find me a very unsubstantial caterer though," said the young lady. "But how beautifully Miss MacKinnon sings. And I love anything about the sea—it is so sad, and wild, and beautiful. I always think of those lovely lines of Tennyson's beginning:

*"Break, Break, Break—
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea."*

Of course you know them?"

"Yes," said Peter, "but the up-to-date version suits me better," and he went on in a sepulchral voice:—

*"Broke, broke, broke
By the blooming banks you see,
And I would——"*

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"Oh, Mr. Southerden, how can you?" interrupted his partner.

"Well," he replied slangily, "I don't think the sea much chop myself. Its chief interest lies in the fact that it forms the highway to the rest of the world, and its chief beauty is derived from the land—I mean its breakers. What would it be without the land it beats its senseless head against? The brave old mother earth for me. *She* works silently and untreachingly without always making a pother."

"You don't like the ocean then, the home of romance and daring, brave hearts and white wings——"

"Generally dirty brown," put in Peter.

His partner looked at him amusedly. "I don't believe," she said, "that you really never felt the influence of that great mass of living waters, the theme of poets, the friend of the sad, the comfort of—of lovers——"

"What do lovers want to be comforted for? Let 'em squirm," muttered Peter.

"Oh, you are in a hopelessly rebellious mood," said his partner laughing. "You certainly are not conventional."

"Conventional," replied Peter, rousing up, but still pursuing his own train of thinking, "I should hope not. What's conventionality? From the way people act, one would think it a straight waistcoat in which luna-

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tic society must necessarily be confined. But it's just the tight lacing that hampers society and squeezes in its moral and mental breadth and generally gives it the pinchedness about the backbone and the compressed waddle of a tight-laced girl. Conventional society is like a woman, and we have come to look on a certain amount of lacing as perhaps necessary to keep its figure in order, but the fools overdo it. I could swear."

Peter's English had become a little mixed as he glared toward the end of the hall where Mary stood. He rammed a bit of his strong mustache into his mouth and gnawed it fiercely.

His companion glanced at him curiously for a second, then laughed. She had certainly hit on a character, she thought.

"Oh, swear by all means," she said, "though I don't exactly follow the drift of your remarks. But I mean to have it out with you about the ocean some day."

"All right," replied Peter. "I'll be better to argue with after a day or two's ringbarking. 'And the great mountains shall skip like lambs,'" he murmured, watching a stout lady polkaing slowly past with a wiry human cornstalk. "He ought to have a wool-hook to handle her with."

"Oh, you are incorrigible. Come, and we'll polka, too."

They rose and danced away together.

"What queer sticks we are," said Peter. "Half an hour ago I didn't know you and you didn't know me, and now here we are holding on like leeches, and shoving each other in all seriousness about a slippery floor. And outside Immensity rolls, and the eternal stars keep watch, and sometimes they wink at each other and say, 'What a lot of mugs those people are,' if indeed they ever deign to notice such a set of wretched little atoms."

"Speak for yourself," laughed his partner. "Many men have been introduced to me, but never before has one classed me as a 'mug,' or 'a wretched little atom,' in the first half-hour of our acquaintance."

"Ah, but your comfort is that some mugs are of dainty porcelain, though most may be merely pewter. And, speaking of mugs reminds me that I thirst."

When they returned from the supper-room Peter found his next partner, and was fiercely and grotesquely merry for the remainder of the evening, causing many to sway in the pleasing pangs of laughter.

It was almost daybreak when the Bringenbogie party got together near the door preparatory to starting home, most of them looking somewhat dilapidated.

"I'm so tired," said Mary, "dancing with fools and talking to them."

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"You are very uncomplimentary to your partners," replied Norah.

"'World's made up of knaves and fools,'" quoted Mary. "And you wouldn't have me call them knaves, would you?"

"No, for of the knaves and fools, the knaves are by far the bigger fools," said Norah, fixing her headgear.

"You don't appear to be very tired, anyhow," remarked Mary, looking at her. "You and that good-natured Mrs. Marshall over there are the only fresh-looking people in the room. There's a woman now," indicating Mrs. Marshall, who was collecting two or three friendly faced girls of her own, "daughter of a convict, it is said, which is really nothing against her—who, as a poor girl, married a fairly rich man and quadrupled his riches for him by her businesslike head; and yet men say women are no use out of the house. The only thing I have against her is that she picks up her h's in all sorts of impossible places."

"I don't mind people who pick up a few h's. It shows vigor," said Donald, fetching a deep breath. "It's a milk-and-water way of dropping h's that I don't like."

"Mrs. Marshall would suit you then," replied Mary. One night I stayed at her station, for her husband, that man over there with the kind moth-eaten face, doesn't

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count much, and she hurled out so many hearty illegitimate *h's* that I thought her mouth would catch fire with the friction."

"Never look a hostess in the mouth," murmured Peter, with mock—yet perhaps not altogether mock—solemnity. The finer edges of his nature had been uncomfortable all day under what he called Mary's "fireworksy" mood. He felt that the fireworks in question had several times made it rather hot for other people.

The vehicles rolled up to the hall, and the day was just breaking as the Bringenbogie party started for home. Peter sat quite silent on the way, drinking in the largeness of the newborn day, and watching the rolling away of the night with inexpressible enjoyment as the cool air played on his face.

It was quite day when they reached Bringenbogie, and Gordon's never-to-be-forgotten lines:

*'Twas merry in the glowing morn, among the gleaming
grass
To wander as we've wandered many a mile,*

floated through his brain again and again as they drove across the dewy paddocks, while on the steep hills to the left of the rambling station house a few remnants of morning mist clung like the last traces of sleep to the brows of a too early awakened beauty.

CHAPTER VIII

A WEEK later, and toward evening, Norah and Mr. Conough, Donald and Peter, were on their way home from a spot where precipitous rocks and a waterfall and ferns, river oaks and gnarled gums, made up a scene of wild beauty. The place was situated a dozen miles from The Waterholes, and Norah had been to it in former days when Mr. Conough, with a strong-going four-in-hand, used to drive occasional picnic parties out, spinning merrily over the twenty-five miles between it and the station homestead. Upon her expressing a wish to see the spot again, Donald had suggested that they should ride out on this Saturday and take their lunch with them. Holiday time was still in the atmosphere, so out they went, on a day that chanced to be cool, and lunched in the shade of the great river oaks, the men of the party having first had a swim, which Norah, an enthusiastic swimmer herself, much envied. While the men were away bathing, she sat in the shade of a tree trunk and dreamed—dreamed of past merriment in that very place when everybody, including Mr. Conough, was in the full tide of “good times.” Her lips moved in a sad little smile as she

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thought of friends of the past, of the laughter-loving girls, of men also full of laughter and wholesome manhood, but some of whom had grown very serious in the course of time. Norah's face became more thoughtful as she remembered more than one manly face as it grew stiff with repressed pain . . . It was only there, on a rocky seat just beyond the waterfall, whose music even now came softly to her ears, that brave young Frank Baynham . . . how painful it was then! His handsome face rose clearly on her memory, sorrowful and set, while his lips murmured that it wasn't her fault . . . she couldn't help it . . . he was so sorry to have pained her—gentle, generous words that made her wretched to have been the cause of them. Why should these things be? . . . Norah heard the swimmers' voices as they returned along the rocky bed of the creek. She roused herself, and her face flushed a little as she saw Donald drawing nearer, saw him clamber up the precipitous rocks with the careless grace that seemed characteristic of his powerful frame, saw the light in his deep-set eyes as they rested on her . . . these things will be! And as he threw off his hat and cast himself down upon the grass he, as strong strenuous men sometimes do notwithstanding the almost volcanic action of which they are capable, seemed to bring with him complete ease and

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restfulness—restfulness which spread from him and pervaded all who were near.

In the cool of the afternoon the small party turned their faces homeward, and as they rode steadily along Donald and Norah on their fast walkers were soon considerably in advance of the other two, or perhaps there was a touch of the design that Love—the artful hypocrite—so often conceals even from himself—but Donald took a short cut which those behind did not follow when they came to it. Nor did he and Norah see them again on the return journey.

A wallaby started up and made off through the timber, and presently Fidget jumped sideways half a rood, more or less, as a kangaroo-rat leaped from his cosy nest almost under her feet. Then another wallaby was seen putting up a record on the hill to the right.

“We’ll give the next one we see a spin,” said Donald.

A few minutes later he snatched off his peak hat, rolled it tightly in his hand, gathered in his reins, and saying, “Here’s one,” was off like a shot, and Norah saw a wallaby bounding a hundred yards away. Soon Donald wheeled the wallaby and with Norah twenty yards behind to prevent its breaking back raced it in a half-circle for two or three hundred yards. At last, hard pressed it made a desperate attempt to break back behind Donald, and Norah’s fierce mare went clean

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over it, tumbling it rapidly but apparently without injury, for the frightened creature was up and off in a second although pretty evidently exhausted.

"Oh, let the poor thing go," entreated Norah. "I can't bear killing them."

"That I will," replied Donald, reining up the reefing Shylock. "It was only for the spin that I took to him."

"Your forehead is covered with blood," said Norah.

"Only a scratch from some twigs," answered Donald, wiping it off.

"Got a pin?" queried Norah. "I tore the skirt of my habit coming through those wattles."

At this Donald was much concerned, but failed to find a pin, and Norah had none. The pin is the companion of the makeshift.

"I must use a hairpin," she said. "That gallop was delightful, I must admit, and will be quite an experience for the wallaby, poor fellow. I hope he wasn't hurt. But let us ride like Christians while I fix this garment. Steadily, Fidget."

They walked slowly along while Norah, declining Donald's big-fingered offer of help, pinned up the rent.

"I say," he began presently, "I have been wanting to ask you something. Is there anything wrong with Miss MacKinnon? She was hardly civil to me at the ball and the day after, and for the life of me I can't tell

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what has caused it. I hadn't a chance to ask her or I would have done so." There was a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"She has certainly been rather strange in her manner lately, and sometimes appeared quite cool, even to me. But I think it is only one of her moods. I have known her from her school days, and she was always a little erratic on the surface, but the depths of her character are good as gold," said Norah, seeking as usual to cover up any apparent deficiencies in a friend.

"Well, I suppose that's it," said Donald in his hearty way. "Somehow an apparent lack of frankness in a friend has a mighty chilling effect upon me."

"Oh, she'll be all right next time you see her," said Norah, eyeing a solitary white cockatoo screeching and circling nearly a hundred yards overhead.

"I hope so," replied Donald as he let the reins fall on Shylock's neck and sat easily in the saddle while the hot-blooded animal picked his rapid way beside Fidget to the accompaniment of hoof-falls and crackling twigs. "What a lovely evening it is going to be."

Then as their horses surmounted a ridge, the riders reined in involuntarily, and stood silent for a moment. Away to the right the sun, half an hour from setting, poured from behind a cloud a glory of slanting rays through the great gums which, in free majesty, reared

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their heads at intervals along a glade extending far into the mystic curtain of light. No undergrowth broke the refreshing vista of green, and dimly the dark forest-covered hills rose beyond.

"Such a scene as that," said Donald in a low tone, "always reminds me of our first parents in those fresh early days when the world was young and an angel would visit them, coming 'in glorious shape' through the trees."

Donald's love for Milton was revealed occasionally in the little snatches which slipped out in his talk.

"Ah," he continued, "in those days there were no conditional purchases or need of hard cash. And is not such a scene as this a recalling of those days! Yonder is the Spirit of Light, here are we—a modern Adam and Eve—and this," gazing down the flat curtained with radiant sunlight, "is, or might be, our Eden."

Donald's voice trembled with the passion he strove to hide, and his heart beat out the call to action. But his nineteenth century wisdom, or unwisdom, whispered, "Not yet. You've no right yet. Where is your prudence, your pride. Think of the unpaid promissory note."

The partially veiled earnestness of his concluding words was such as to make Norah's pulse quicken and her cheek flush.

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"Oh, but what about the serpent?" she asked hurriedly.

"Don't know," replied Donald with a laugh. "Perhaps Shylock will do. He plays the devil sometimes," and he patted the lean neck affectionately. "But then he has a lot of good points."

"Old Nick is credited with good points, too," said Norah, fencing off the disturbing avowal of love which intuition told her was trembling in the balance, and so securing a little breathing time.

"I don't doubt that he has some, too," said Donald, "though perhaps a bit grown over. And then he's something of a wag, which is a great point in his favor."

"And he has been called a gentleman," said Norah.

"I'm afraid he's not. You see, he's a liar, and how can a liar be a gentleman?" said Donald simply.

"Poor old Satan," said Norah meditatively. "Suppose one were sorely tempted to do something very wicked and attempted it and failed—would one lie and hate as Satan did? What would you do?" She looked straight at Donald.

"Who can tell!" he said, returning the gaze. "I know what I ought to do—stand in the open on a bed-rock of fact, and take the consequences."

"You would act the true man whatever happened, I

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believe," said Norah without taking her eyes from his.

A half-smile came over his face. "You'll have me beyond my depth soon," he said, "if indeed my flounderings haven't proclaimed me beyond it long ago."

Silence for fifty yards, then——

"I wonder what it's like to hate so fiercely," said Norah, "I don't think I've ever hated, barring a school-girl hatred or two, which have been wiped out by the ocean of time like markings on the sand. I'm getting quite poetic," and she struck with her whip at a big bush fly that routed round Fidget's nose.

"Hate!" said Donald, drawing a deep breath of the delightful air scented with the honey scent of the gum flowers. "Bother hate. Life's too large a thing for hate. It's not worth while hating poor little fellow mortals flashing past us through Immensity. Say they are treacherous and do us great injury! We don't hate them for it just as we don't hate a snake for wanting to bite us. We only kill it and chuck it behind a log. It's a sad confession to utter in these days, but I don't think I'd ever make a good hater."

He shook his big head decidedly.

Norah was watching him with increasing pleasure. She felt that some unusual influence must have loosened his tongue, generally silent in all matters relating to

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the feelings. Then at his concluding words all the reckless mischief in her Irish blood tingled through her veins.

"Of course it is very sad not to be a good hater, but," slowly, and with dancing eyes fixed on a bear in the fork of a tree, "do you think you'd ever make a decent lover?"

Then Donald's worldly wisdom was cast to the winds. What was money, position, to begin with. Was he not a strong man capable of making all these things, doubly capable were Norah by his side, for whose sake all work, all wearisome difficulties to be overcome, would be but pleasure. His whole being awoke and concentrated itself in a confident "Yes," while Shylock was by Fidget's side at a bound. But Fidget, at one with her mistress, bounded almost simultaneously with Shylock. In the same instant Norah, with a laugh, flashed a daring glance of merriment, defiance—what was there not in that multitudinous glance?—at Donald, and a second later Fidget was at a gallop, with Shylock a length or two behind her.

"Miss Conough," said Donald in a voice that carried clearly and strongly to Norah.

"I'll race you home," cried Norah recklessly, steering Fidget with wonderful dexterity through a clump of close-growing saplings.

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Donald could see nothing of her face but a pink right ear, and occasionally a bit of flushed cheek. Norah felt that she would rather die than pull up ignominiously just then. Besides she was in a daring humor and enjoyed the gallop heart and soul. Trusting in Fidget's powers, she determined to go on until the house was reached. There she would find temporary refuge with her father and Peter, and the future could take care of itself. "How can I look him in the face now," was her thought, while she called herself a coward for entertaining it. But the gallop was grand and the frolic novel, and the mare drew steadily away from Shylock, who crashed on behind. They were galloping parallel with a fence on the right, at a distance of eighty yards from it. Suddenly a happy thought struck Norah, and she promptly acted upon it. Wheeling Fidget in a clear place, she rode her straight at the fence, an old chock-and-log about five feet high, with a top rail on dog-legs. Fidget rose at it eight feet away with a mighty spring, and Norah enjoyed to her very heart the grand leap and the downward rush through the air. Then she rode along on the opposite side of the fence in the same direction as before but bearing away to the right, and waved her whip at Donald in token of farewell. Donald had let out a "Bravo" at the jump, but was not at all put out by Norah's sudden

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move, and when she waved a farewell he lost his head and vowed he would catch her or die. Turning, he rushed Shylock full speed at the fence. He could have pulled a top rail off and led the horse over, but he would not. There are times when a little reckless display is politic. Beside, he had no time to lose. Norah held her breath, for relying on Shylock's well-known lack of jumping powers and the big fence, she never dreamed that Donald would follow so promptly in her tracks. But the fence was old; there was a crash, a smashed top-rail and displaced middle one, a flying chock, a scramble, and pounding of the earth by hoofs, and Shylock recovered himself without unseating his rider. Hat off and both feet out of the stirrups, Donald, with a laugh, bore down upon Norah, whose strong hands, to enable her to see the jump, had thrown Fidget almost upon her haunches. With Donald's triumphant laugh Norah's anxiety fled, and enjoying the humor of the thing more than ever she again urged Fidget onwards. But Donald, with his stirrups flying, rode like a mad-man, taking short cuts over logs and through impossible clumps of saplings and heads of fallen trees, and held his own with Norah's mare. Then he chuckled exultingly, for he knew that two or three hundred yards ahead was an old trap-yard, the fence on the left had increased in height to seven or eight feet, and away

to the right he saw the corresponding wing of the yard.

Suddenly Norah also remembered the trap-yard; she had seen it once or twice years ago, but had never before approached it from the side on which she was now. She looked about for a means of escape—but it was too late.

“Mind the yard,” roared Donald, pulling on Shylock. Five seconds later they rode tumultuously into it, and with many a slip and slither pulled up on the green closely nipped grass which carpeted it thickly. Donald wheeled quickly and pulled the old disused gate to with a crash and a groan. There was Norah, fairly trapped, and rebellious as ever a wild stallion held by those yards in days gone by. Donald rode toward her a pace or two, pulled up, and sat like a mounted trooper on parade, while his dark eyes blazed with fun and excitement. The mare and Shylock stood perfectly still, blowing vigorously. Norah drew up her figure defiantly, while her eyes, to use a phrase of Peter’s, flashed like a Heaven in flames. She was inwardly consumed with half-hysterical mirth and vexation combined, but no movement of face or body betrayed her. So these two gazed at each other, Donald in masterful mirthful tenderness; Norah in defiance.

“Now,” said Donald after a moment’s silence.

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"Well," said Norah, with quiet imperiousness.

Silence unbroken, save for the breathing of the horses, for a good half-minute. Then——

"Open the gate," said Norah, in a tone and with a gesture that made Donald more mad about her than ever, while she pointed at, or rather indicated, the gate in question with her whip.

He hesitated for a fraction of a second, then bowing slightly, rode to the gate, opened it while it shrieked dismally, and turning—faced Norah as before. Donald understood perfectly that the only way to hold a proud woman is to let her go.

"The gate is open," he said.

She moved Fidget steadily toward it for a dozen paces, then——

"Before you go I want to ask you one question, if I may," said Donald, in the tone of high courtesy used by a commander-in-chief to a brave adversary whose sword he has just received and restored with a grant of liberty to the owner.

Fidget stopped dead.

"Well?" said Norah quietly, raising her eyes slowly to Donald's. Then as her eyes met his once more she could contain herself no longer, but burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter bordering on the hysterical, and would have rushed Fidget out of the gate.

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But it was too late, for Donald had seized her reins, and——

“Please, Mr. Southerden, let me go through the gate—ah, must I surrender?” whispered Norah breathlessly, half-sobbing as her head was drawn down upon Donald’s strong shoulder. So, in that lonely old yard these two touched Heaven for a space and opened the portals of a new world—a world of beauty and wonder which, hand in hand, they would explore together. And a dozen little blue-eyed villains of soldier-birds, the self-constituted sentinels of the bush, hopping and perching on an old dead wattle by the gate, shouted their quick sharp shout—no other word describes it—with all their little lungs, while Fidget and Shylock, the neglected reins lying on their necks, stood quite still in most unwonted goodness, their noses close together and occasionally rubbing.

“Are you aware, sir,” said Norah, “that I am in imminent danger of slipping out of the saddle, and that my hat is all crooked, and my hair has broken out into open rebellion? No wonder, seeing the treatment its tyrannic mistress has received.”

Then—well, the sun sank out of sight, the silence of the bush deepened, and all things grew dim and indistinct.

“Oh, what is the time?” said Norah at length, sud-

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denly awakening to the fact that twilight was closing upon them and that Mr. Conough and Peter had probably already reached home.

"Bother the time," was the reply.

"Amen," whispered Norah.

Soon, however, the horses, apparently by mutual consent, moved out of the gate and paced slowly on together. Lovers who are at home in the saddle have many advantages, especially the lady. Horses understand, and courtship on horseback is allied to the fine arts.

"Do you know," said Norah when, curiously enough at a few paces from the yard the horses had again come to a standstill, "that you left your hat where you jumped so successfully on Shylock?"

She gave a tuft of his close-growing hair a small tug with her finger and thumb.

Donald laughed. "I'll get my hat in a minute," said he. "But think what might have happened if Shylock had not jumped, as you call it, that fence."

"Or rather think what might not have happened," murmured Norah with a restful sigh. Her head chanced to be on Donald's shoulder, and her eyes, turned toward the deep world above, looked like wells into which two of the early stars had fallen. Donald's brain reeled, and—but I pause. Indeed I do not know how I would

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have got this laggard couple home but for the timely assistance of a wise-looking old 'possum in a neighboring white gum, who cleared his throat vigorously, preparatory, no doubt, to making a few comments to Mrs. 'Possum and 'Possum junior on the conduct of the mortals below.

"Oh, I say," said Donald, fairly awakened to the fact that night had fallen, "it'll be as dark as pitch in ten minutes, we're seven miles from home, and the track is none too good for a riding habit."

"I'll be all right," replied Norah. "We'll catch it when we get home," with a shy laugh.

"Don't care," answered Donald.

They rode back quickly, found the hat and got through the gap made by Shylock. Then Donald led the way, and along the cattle track by the fence they trotted fast and merrily, sometimes breaking into a canter, sometimes steadying down to a walk at an extra bad crossing or patch of fallen timber. The night was brilliant with stars before they—with brains somewhat disorganized by their happiness, reached home.

"Well, you're a pretty pair," said Mr. Conough, standing at the gate as they rode up, while the light streamed from the open door behind him. "Did ye get bushed?"

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"Yes," said Donald promptly. "I never got so bushed in my life.

"A nice bushman ye are," replied the old man banteringly; we were beginning to think of a search party. But come in me little b'y, come in. Old Billy's just come home and he'll see to the horses. Pether left long ago as he said he couldn't wait."

"I'll unsaddle Shylock," said Donald. "I want to see to his back. Get me a dipper of water please, Billy."

He undid the girths while Old Billy attended to Fidget, on whose neck Norah bestowed a kiss before leaving her. Then, such is the effect of conscience, Norah put her arms round Mr. Conough's neck, kissed him soundly, and bolted into the house before any further questions could be asked.

"Well, well," said the old man, following along the path with Donald, "what an impetuous child she is. How did ye come to get bushed?" he added as they entered the house.

As Norah had fled and left him to face the inevitable questioning alone, Donald braced himself up and told all about how he and she had got "bushed"—manfully and with much credit in the old man's eyes, though Donald was unconscious of that.

After a little time Norah opened the door and stepped

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into the room, freshly dressed and with a heightened color which deepened as at a glance she guessed what had happened. Then the memory of the thronging events of the afternoon, the sight of the dear old white head, and the deep tenderness in the rugged face, quite overcame her.

"Oh, Daddy," she half-whispered, and flinging her arms round the old man's neck she hid her face on his shoulder and burst into tears in spite of her efforts to control them.

"Hush, then—ah, the little gir-r-l—the little soft-hearted gir-r-l," murmured Mr. Conough, stroking her hair fondly. "Thrish, pet, there, there—honey, pet, now," and he quieted her in his homely fashion. Soon Norah looked up and the light of her eyes flashed through her tears for a second ere she dashed them away and laughed nervously.

"I'm a big crybaby, but it's all his fault," she said, looking at Donald. The back of her head rested on Mr. Conough's shoulder and her left arm lay round him, while in her right hand she grasped one of his big fingers tightly like a little child.

"So ye are, so ye are," said the old man tenderly. "Come here, me little b'y."

Donald obeyed, and Mr. Conough gently placed one mighty hand on his head and one on Norah's.

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"Me little b'y and me little gir-r-l, Gahd bless ye both," he said in a deep tone and bowing his tall white head reverently. Then he left the room quietly and quickly and they heard his firm step pass along the hall.

* * * * *

An hour or two after tea, Donald, having said good-night to Norah at the gate, the first long good-night of those who have newly found each other, rode away bearing with him a letter which Old Billy had brought for him from Deep Creek, but which he had thrust into his pocket at a moment of more interest and afterward quite forgotten. As he neared the hut he heard extraordinary sounds proceeding from it, and laughed to himself. He rode quietly up, put Shylock into the yard, and gave him the feed which Peter had got ready for him. Then he walked softly to the hut and peeped through a corner of the window. There stood Peter, his face flushed and his eyes bright with humor and keen enjoyment, fiddling with all his might, while Boiler sat with his maimed foreleg raised uneasily, his eyes, containing a world of trouble, fixed on his master's face. Every few minutes the dog emitted a prolonged howl which Peter gleefully accompanied with a weird shrieking obligato that showed him to be a master of his instrument. As each howl died down, Peter fell

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away into soft minor keys which, working on the dog's feelings, speedily produced another howl. Soon they were continuous, and Boiler was evidently full of vague and quite inexpressible sorrow.

Donald brought the strange duet to a close by walking into the hut.

"Hello, Dan, old fellow," exclaimed Peter. "What do you think of Boiler's voice? Is it improving? We just wanted your bass to make the thing complete."

He placed the violin on the table.

"I've got a prime melon," he continued. "Come and have some."

He cut a piece for Donald, who, proceeding to find a seat, stumbled over Boiler. "You still keep on bringing this old scut inside," was his polite remark, as he patted Boiler's scarred head.

"He's no scut," said Peter. "He's a gentleman, is Boiler, although he loves a row and a moonlight romance and is a bit of a rake generally. He has more brains than three ordinary men. I say, I wish we'd got the post to-day, there might be a letter about that infernal P-N. Payment was due yesterday and if Rowlands can't meet it we're done for."

Donald laid down his melon and felt in his breast pocket. "I expect this will settle our fate," said he, tearing open the letter given him by Billy.

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The letter was about the promissory note, and stated briefly that owing to Rowlands having most unexpectedly and advantageously sold some heretofore valueless mining shares, he was able to meet payment.

"That's good," said Peter, as Donald finished reading.

Donald looked thoughtfully before him for a few minutes, the letter in his hand.

"I say, Peter," he said at last.

"What's up?"

"I'm going to marry Norah Conough."

"Good luck, old man," said Peter with deep sincerity, and the two brown hands gripped with a great grip.

Donald laughed a little, as men will, to cover all suspicion of deeper feeling.

"I must go and let my horse out," said Peter, while his eyes twinkled. "And Dan, me son, I think you were a highly sensible man to take my advice about the acquirement of that non-residential C. P."

"You impudent beggar," exclaimed Donald, reaching out at him. But Peter fled through the open doorway.

That same evening Theresa Greentree stepped from the mail coach on her return to Deep Creek.

CHAPTER IX

DURING the period of Theresa's absence, Donald, as it chanced, had been but little to Deep Creek. On mail days, or when anything was required from the store, Peter had generally gone in. Even when shoeing was necessary he, one of the handiest of men, was always able to do it unless something very special was required. Now, however, Donald had work which must be done by a smith. After slight hesitation he decided to take it himself to Nicholas. He had not seen the latter since the evening on which he had fought him, but felt that Nicholas bore no malice for the beating. His attitude on the question of Theresa might, however, be a different matter. Still there could now surely be no cause of difference between them, or of enmity on the part of Nicholas.

Donald pulled up at the smithy door, and the owner came out. Without hesitation Donald held out his hand.

"Is it too late to wish you a Happy New Year?" he said.

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Nicholas looked squarely at him.

"I'd like well to shake hands," he said. "But I can't the way things are. A Happy New Year! It may or may not be worth a damn to me, and you may or may not be the cause. I'm going to talk straight."

"Out with it," said Donald. "I see we have to clear things up a bit."

He flushed slightly as he drew in his hand. No man cares for even an honest rebuff.

"It's man to man," said Nicholas. "You know very well who came home last week. Now she is back I've got to deal with you, an' I tell you straight——"

"Before you say any more, listen to me," interrupted Donald. "I have no desire to pay court to Miss Greentree, nor to marry her or meet her otherwise than as a friend. Things were not really as you supposed. I'll tell you more, and speaking of such a thing, as you will understand, is a long stretch on my part—I'm going to be married myself. Miss Conough has honored me by accepting me as her future husband, and being the happiest man on earth I am prepared to do everything in my mortal power to put you in a similar position. That's all I have to say, and if you don't like to shake hands you may go to the devil."

"Put it there," roared Nicholas, "and good luck to you."

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Donald's hand was not a tender thing, but he nursed it tenderly for some time after Nicholas had shaken it.

As he drew near to Deep Creek, he felt that to comfortably carry off the situation with Theresa did not look so easy at it may have done three or four miles back.

A speech of Norah's bothered him.

"Donald," she had said in that jesting way which so often is but a cloak for earnestness, "we are going to break into double harness, aren't we! Well, if you have any secrets of the past, tell me them before we are yoked up, or be forever silent. It's ever so much better for people to break in without winkers when they marry, isn't it? If they know nothing of what is behind them, and somebody after they marry suddenly pulls off the winkers, there is likely to be a smash in the old buggy of life."

Donald, amid laughter, had answered that there were no secrets so far as he was concerned, yet now, as he rode toward Deep Creek, why should he be concerned about meeting another woman, one, too, between whom and himself the veil of passion had been, if only for a moment, torn aside scarcely two months ago. He had no concern as to his own feelings, but had an uneasy consciousness that Theresa might not be in the same

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position. The thing troubled him. Yet what other answer could he have given Norah! After all, if secret there were, it was not his.

The first person he met, however, was not Theresa, but Norah.

Her face lighted up with pleasure when she saw him; it appeared to him to have worn a look of anxiety.

"I did not expect to see you here," said Donald. "How delightful the unexpected sometimes is. Isn't it miserable—having to greet each other here in the open. But you look worried! What is it?"

"We are in a good deal of trouble," Norah replied. "My uncle Alec arrived this morning, by coach. He meant to pay us a surprise visit. He has for a long time been unwell, and two or three days ago got a chill, and is now too ill even to go on to The Waterholes. We have put him to bed, and I have been with him for the last four hours. Billy has ridden off for Doctor McLennon and father is here with me. I must go in again, dear."

Donald waited until he could hear the doctor's report. In the meantime he saw Theresa, who met him with perfect ease and frankness. She was thinner than she had been, and looked even handsomer.

Doctor McLennon spent a long time in the sick room. When he came out he would say nothing definite.

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"There is certainly a chill," he said, "but there is much more than a chill. I will stay here to-night. To-morrow I will be better able to speak with certainty."

Next day Donald again rode in to Deep Creek. He met Theresa on the veranda.

"Mr. Conough is a little better," she said. "He wants to see you."

Her manner was merely such as she would use to any welcome guest of the inn. She was better dressed than of yore. Essentially adaptable, the good Sydney shops, and the better-dressed women whom she had singled out with unerring eye, had enabled her to add a touch of smartness to her own appearance.

Decidedly she looked well. Yet Donald felt, and it was a matter of little curious speculation on his part as to why it should be so, nothing whatever of the old attraction.

Almost immediately he was taken into the sick man's room. The doctor, and Norah and her father, were there.

Alexander Conough was somewhat younger than his brother, yet he looked older. A haggard, handsome man, with deep-sunk eyes that gleamed, Donald thought, with more fire than he had ever before seen in the human eye.

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"So this is the fortunate man," he said, looking long at Donald. "Well, I like what can be seen of him, at all events. Donald, you are just in time for the verdict. Now then, Doctor. Have the jury agreed, or will there have to be a new trial."

There was a gleam of amusement on the pain-stricken face.

"Well, you insist on plain speech, and you are one of those men with whom anything else would be mere silliness. You are suffering from a serious internal complaint, and there is just one chance—Sydney forthwith, and an operation."

Norah's face blanched, but the sick man laughed.

"Bravo, Doctor, you have found out what I have been sure of these six months. Well, an operation will be new trial enough, eh?"

"Oh, Uncle!" said Norah, in a piteous little cry, holding tightly one of his hands.

"There, my pet, don't grieve." He ran a hand over her hair. "Listen to me, all of you," he said. "I've lugged this old ramshackle of a body about with me till I'm sick of it. Now it is in my mind that I'll rest here for a month or two with my little girl," his eyes turned to Norah, "and then I'll leave this worn-out tenement under one of the big gums at The Waterholes, and go and find my mate. I'll stay as long as I can with you—

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I won't leave till the great Landlord gives me notice to quit. And, maybe, I'll come back and look at the old place occasionally, and be near my little girl, and in fullness of time, hear little voices about her. That settles the operation, eh, Doctor? Man, I don't want any adjournment—unless for this little girl."

Eventually, however, Norah and Owen Conough clinging to the possible chance held out by an operation, the sick man gave way.

"All right," he said to his brother, "but Doctor McLennon must come along. It'll interest him to see how the old joists and things have stood. The timber was good at the outset, eh, Owen?"

"Oh, man—don't," cried Owen Conough. And Alec took his hand, and remained silent.

A week passed before Alec Conough was pronounced fit for careful travelling. Every day Donald rode in to make inquiry. But Theresa he scarcely saw, except to exchange a friendly greeting. Perhaps, had he been thinking less of other things, he might have seen more under the greetings than mere friendliness.

On the evening before the proposed departure he went to say good-bye. Necessary business had prevented his going to Deep Creek since the morning of the preceding day.

It was Owen Conough whom he first saw. The old

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man looked very tired. He took Donald into a side room, and carefully shut the door.

"I'm glad ye've come, me little b'y. My brother is better to-night. Norah has fallen asleep, poor child. She had little sleep last night. Now, I brought ye in here to tell ye a story—it is not a happy one. But ye must have some refreshment first."

Donald declaring he needed none, they seated themselves on opposite sides of a small table, and Mr. Conough, looking full at Donald, began in his mellow bass, made richer by strong feeling.

"'Tis a long story, and I scarce know how to begin, me son, for ye are like a son to me. I must go a little into the hithory of the family. Ye see, in the early days my brother Alec and myself were just such mates as you and Pether are. Alec was some years younger than I, and I think 'tis hardly possible for brothers to be more to each other than we were. A merry, handsome fellow he was, strong and utterly impetuous and fiery. We had good luck on the diggings and in other ways, and were well off. Our run was a fine one, not too big, but nearly every acre of it was of good quality.

"Near us lived a squatter named Thomas Hayford, a big man, with clustering curly hair on his head with its receding forehead. Many thought him handsome, but there was something repellent about him. His face

when in repose was cruel, an appearance which was perhaps heightened by a scar on his temple. I disliked him from the moment I saw him, and wouldn't have trusted him a foot.

"His wife was a lady whose face and figure I have seldom seen equaled, a gracious, beautiful creature such as we meet but once or twice in our lives, who looked straight at you with wonderful gray eyes. But there seemed to be a latent lightning about her such as we see in far-off banks of clouds on a summer's afternoon, which no man would do well to awaken.

"I may say that much that I am about to tell ye, me little b'y, was not known to me until long after the events had happened. My brother and I got to know the Hayfords very well, tolerating the husband for the sake of the wife. She and Alec speedily became great friends, and it was not long before I discovered that he worshiped her. That seems a strong expression, but if ye knew the intensity of the man, ye would not think it so. It was not long also, before I found out, partly by accident, that Mrs. Hayford was thoroughly unhappy with her husband; that he was cruel and suspicious, and had a tongue tipped with poison. And, after I understood, many were the cruel little speeches I heard fall from his lips while other people were present. I could see her eye flash, but she was too proud to show

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that she even noticed them. She was grieving, too, over the death of her one little daughter, a matter which did not appear to concern her husband much. He seemed to delight in humiliating her, his being, I think, one of those natures to whom the torture of a good woman in their power affords the keenest pleasure. The fact is that she was immeasurably his superior in every way, and he knew it, and knew that in her heart she could not but despise him. And he grew to hating her as only a coward and a liar can hate, more especially as his petty cruelties were, outwardly at least, wholly disregarded by her, and she remained as always, calm, and gentle, and sweet.

“It seems that, while occupying the same house, they were latterly living as strangers to each other, although it did not appear so to the outside world, and her home was noted for the perfect comfort, and order, and daintiness, that appeared everywhere. She had married when a mere girl under the influence of what is called first love, which too often, though not always, thank Gahd, is merely another name for infatuation which has cursed the lives of numberless women, and men, too.

“Well, several months passed, and Alec, who in the first stages of their acquaintance had seen much of the Hayfords, now hardly approached them, and he looked

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altogether unlike the bright b'y he had been. Always a daredevil, his feats of recklessness were the wonder of every young fellow within fifty miles. He was the grandest rider that I ever knew, and nearly always had half-a-dozen youngsters on hand. Often he would ride the lot of them in turn before breakfast—have them all hot at once. And the colts and fillies of those days were lads to handle—there is nothing like them now. Alec began to outdo even himself in recklessness. Ah, the lad, the lad; many's the time I thrembled for his neck, but he got off somehow where other men would surely have been killed.

“Then one day he came to me and asked me if I could do without him, as he wished to go away for a year.

“‘I can manage it, me b'y,’ said I. ‘But why do you wish to go away?’

He laughed. “‘Must see a little of the world before I die,’ said he lightly. ‘You know what Shakespeare says about homekeeping youths.’

“I looked straight at him; and then he looked at me, and the lightness fell away from him.

“‘There’s another reason than that, brother,’ said I.

“He did not answer for a moment, then——

“‘Suppose there is,’ he broke out. ‘Suppose the devil has possession of me, should I not try to shake

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him off? I am doubtful if I can do it by staying here and battling my heart out and turning my brain to fire.'

"His eyes gleamed for a moment like those of a man in a fever; then he laughed.

"'I don't want to wreck my own life,' he said quietly, 'and I would rather perish body and soul than wreck—hers. Therefore, I am going away.'

"'But,' I said, 'you might not have the power to wreck her life?' for I understood him perfectly.

"'I don't know,'" he replied, in the same quiet tone. 'Sometimes when I see how proud and unhappy she is, and how that coward treats her, I am filled with fear—I cannot explain it,' he broke off. 'But sometimes a gallant fast-sailing ship will wreck on rocks where a hulk would escape.'

"'Alec,' I said, 'tell me truly; has ever a word of love passed between ye two?'

"'Never,' he answered. 'But I know—though it seems an utterly egotistical thing to say—I know that she loves me as I love her; and her unhappiness kills me.'

"'I could see he was in deadly earnest.

"'You had better go away, the sooner the better,' said I.

"'And yet it seems like leaving her—she cannot go

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away—no escape for her. But it surely is best that I should go,' he said, talking more to himself than to me. Then I left him, for every man must fight these things out for himself.

"So it was settled he should go to the old counthry. There was some business to be attended to in Ireland concerning my father's will, and it would be very useful if one of us were on the spot.

"Shortly before the time fixed for his leaving, a lot of us were one day at the local pound-yard attending a sale of cattle and horses. In one yard was a grand red bullock—as wild a bullock as could be. Several previous attempts had been made to yard him, alone and with mobs of cattle, but without success. For he would charge a horseman without the slightest hesitation, and now he had only been got into the yard in an accidental sort of way with a lot of other cattle. Alec got him into a yard by himself by jumping into the yard where the mob was, leaving a gate open. The big bullock charged, and went through into the adjoining yard after him, and Alec slipped out a manhole while I shut the gate. Then there was a scene. The fence was high, yet few of us would stop on it, and we stood on posts.

"As the animal went plunging and snuffing round the yard he passed under Alec, and the temptation to have

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a ride was too great for the b'y to resist. He deliberately sprang on the beast's back—'twas the leap of a mad panther. I have seen a few wild sights, but nothing wilder than what followed—the bullock bucking and bellowing and banging into the fence, while his rider laughed and shouted. After a few minutes Alec caught the fence as he whirled past and swung himself on to the rail unhurt, while every man in the place cheered. The b'y was mad with excitement, and two minutes later he shouted, 'Here goes for another,' and sprang on the beast's back again in a corner. But he didn't get on properly and the bullock charged straight at the gate, made a great spring, and fell backward on his rider. Gahd knows how I got the b'y through a manhole—'twas done in a flash, and I heard the rattle of horns on the post behind me as I got clear.

"Alec was terribly hurt, and worst of all his head. The news of the accident no sooner reached Mrs. Hayford than she drove over to our place, and regularly for four weeks did the greater part of the nursing.

"Never was a better nurse. I did not think Alec would pull through, and I believe 'twas to her he owed his life. Nothing seemed to weary her, or take away her hope, and I confess she brought me a comfort nothing else would have done. I knew when I saw her hanging, white and speechless, over Alec's bandage-

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covered face, that he was not mistaken about her; and once she forgot my presence and covered the unconscious hand with kisses and tears. 'Twas pitiful to see her grief, but it never interfered with her nursing. For the first week she and I took turns, then a trained nurse arrived. But Mrs. Hayford still came over as she had been doing, and took her turn.

"In five weeks Alec was out of danger, and she did not come any more; but one day bade us good-bye, as she said she was going to Sydney for a time. It seems there had been trouble between her and her husband, although it was not the first time by any means that she had done nursing in the neighborhood. She had overawed him while Alec was in danger, but now she could bear the strain no longer. The climax was reached when one day he made a great scene before the servants, and used language to her for which his neck should have been wrung. One lad who heard it, a jockey, gave notice on the spot, declaring he would no longer take the man's money. All this I learned afterward, in great part from that lad, who is now a well-to-do grazier near Singleton.

"I'll never forget the look on Mrs. Hayford's face and in her grand eyes, wistful and long-suffering, when she said good-bye. She was away for two or three months, and I guessed she went away because she

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could not tell Alec her real reason for not coming to see him any more.

"Many weeks passed before he became strong enough to go about, but at last he was almost as well as ever, though to this day the hurt on his head troubles him.

"When Mrs. Hayford came back, Alec, who, like myself, at that time knew nothing of what had passed between her and her husband, went to thank her for her goodness. He told me afterward that he and she had spoken earnestly and frankly to each other that day, concealing nothing of their feeling, and that they had parted with the determination to meet no more. But this resolution was brought to naught by an accident. On the day Alec started away he was driving past the Hayford's station, when he found one of their hands lying unconscious, his horse having thrown him. There was no place within miles to take him but to the Hayfords' house, and there Alec took him. Mrs. Hayford chanced to be at home, and the stockman was soon restored to consciousness—he had merely been badly stunned. Alec was about leaving,—he hadn't been there more than half an hour altogether—and even as he turned to go, Mrs. Hayford's husband, who, unfortunately, had been away for a couple of days, arrived, and walked into the room. There was a scene, Hay-

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ford, cool and brutal, using language to his wife which I will not repeat, and bidding her go with my brother as she was so fond of him. She there and then drove away with Alec, never to return to her husband."

Mr. Conough paused for a minute, strongly moved, then went on quietly:

"I will finish the whole sinful, sorrowful story as quickly as possible. Alec told me in later years that when Hayford spoke to his wife so he had a thought to throttle him, but the man and his doings somehow seemed of such little significance that he refrained, principally because of a strange pity that filled him.

"I heard once from Alec in England and again from America. Then I heard nothing further for several months. Quite suddenly he came home by himself in great grief and perplexity. He told me his wife—he invariably called her his wife—had left him shortly before. It seemed that a son had been born to them, who died when a month old, and almost broken-hearted, but with a determination which nothing could alter, Kathleen—that was her name—had left Alec, saying she could no longer live a life the happiness of which arose out of wrong. 'Twas pitiful to hear him tell of their parting, of her grief, only equaled by her anxiety for his welfare and the sweet gentleness with which she carried out her determination. She gave

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everything she possessed in the world to charity and entered as a hospital nurse in Melbourne, working for a bare living. She refused to accept anything from Alec, saying she had more than she needed.

"After telling me the whole story, Alec said not another word about it, but silent and continuously at work, stayed with me for the next two months—'twas the busy part of the year. At the end of that time news came of Hayford's death in a shipwreck off the coast of South America. Months before that his brother, Frederick, had taken charge of his station, and I did not know where he had gone.

"Shortly after the news came Alec went off to Melbourne—I knew 'twas to see if he could not get Kathleen to marry him and come back to him. He found her quite broken in health and unable to go on with any work, and persuaded her to marry him. She had a fancy, too, that she should marry for the sake of the memory of her little dead b'y.

"They lived near Melbourne for some time. Then, Alec having business in Queensland which would keep him away for a few weeks, and his wife not being well, my wife—I had been married for a year or more—got her to stay with us during Alec's absence. She had been with us only three weeks when Thomas Hayford suddenly came home. The report of his death was

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false—he had escaped in some strange way, and lived for a time in a wild part of South America.”

The speaker again paused for a moment, then went on in a voice deepened by emotion:—

“I saw him shortly afterward, and he came to me holding out his hand, and laughingly congratulated me on Alec’s marriage, his face expressing the malicious pleasure that he felt. I looked at him, and did not take the hand. He was quite unabashed, and inquired after Mrs. Alec’s health, with mock regret for his inopportune return. I told him never to cross my path again, or I would break his back as I would that of a snake. He grew white and drew back as I spoke; then he laughed once more and rode away, kissing his hand to me as he left. But he never came near me again,” added the old man grimly.

“Poor Kathleen,” he went on, “seemed crushed by the news of Hayford’s return, and Alec came home in great haste only to find her very ill. I never saw a man look more mind-weary than he did, but he gave no sign of the mental torture that preyed upon him. I dreaded lest he should meet Thomas Hayford, and planned things so that he should not if I could help it.

“Now Frederick Hayford, whom I mentioned before, was an old enemy of Alec’s. They had gone to school together, and Frederick, sneak and bully as he

was, had perhaps good cause for hating. Unlike his brother, Frederick was very fair in appearance, and I have always noticed that a fair sneak is worse than a dark one.

"The third day after Alec's arrival I had occasion to go to a place a dozen miles away, where there were a store and a public house and two or three cottages. Alec had scarcely left Kathleen's side for three days and nights, and was worn out. As she seemed a little better, I persuaded him to come with me, thinking the open air would do him good.

"As we drove up to the public house I could see that there was a shooting party of some sort, several men being there with guns. A few on horseback were already riding away, and others were preparing to mount.

"Alec got out of the trap to make some inquiries of the publican for me, and as he did so Frederick Hayford and two or three others rode round from the back of the stables. Alec strode past them toward the house, nodding to a few whom he knew, and as he did so I heard a sneering laugh from Frederick Hayford. I trembled lest anything should happen. I knew that since his accident Alec was quite uncontrollable when greatly moved, and to-day, from anxiety and weariness, he was quite unlike his usual self, and seemed burning

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as in a fever. Ah, me little b'y, me heart ached for him, and for the woman he loved, and their blighted lives. He looked a gallant man as he went up the yard. He was a few paces past Frederick Hayford when the latter said something in a low tone to those around him. I did not catch the words then, but I heard afterward what they were. They related to Kathleen, and nobody but a cowardly hound would have spoken them. Unfortunately, Alec caught them, and turning, rushed at Hayford, who was still on his horse. Three or four bystanders tried to hold Alec while Hayford, a thorough coward, turned white and rode after some of the other shooters, affecting to treat Alec with contempt, and concealing his own cowardice. Then Alec shook those who held him aside like rats, seized a gun, and fired pointblank at Hayford, who fell from his horse and lay groaning. By this time I was at Alec's side, and he stared at me with wild eyes.

"'That shot has killed Kathleen,' he said, like a man in a dream.

"He gave himself up to a trooper who was there, and we tried to keep the whole affair from Kathleen. But she found it out through a blundering maidservant. She died a few days afterward, leaving behind her a little daughter. That little girl was Norah. Gahd never blessed me with children of my own."

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The old man paused, and he and Donald sat for a few moments without speaking. Then——

"There is more to tell?" asked Donald in a low tone.

"Just a little. Before Kathleen died she made my wife and me promise to bring the little gir-r-l up as our own, never revealing to her her real father and mother; and Alec, too, urged this. We promised, and so managed it that I think there is hardly a living soul who knows that I am not Norah's father. I sold out soon afterward and came up here, and that enabled us to keep the secret still bettther. Many an anxious debate my wife and I had as to whether we did right—surely the truth is best at all times. But Alec always held to the plan, and until the night before last Norah did not know he was her father. Then she accidentally overheard some words between him and me that told her part of the truth, and she would not rest until she knew it all. She is not a woman who can be put off. She insisted also on your knowing everything, which is right. Heaven knows whether we did right to keep it all from her, but it is strange to think that the plan of a lifetime should be upset by an accident. Yet it is perhaps all for the best, and we are in Gahd's hands."

The white head bowed reverently.

"I haven't told ye everything yet," the old man went on after a moment. "Alec was thried for attempted

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murder, and would hear of no defense—not one word.

“‘I am guilty—I meant to kill the man. Why waste time in a trial?’ he said, standing at his full height in the dock, his face pale and unmoved. He told me afterward he hoped they would sentence him to death; but his sentence was twelve years. Hayford did not die, although his life was despaired of for a time. He got well again, and nobody was more relieved than Alec. The thought of having killed the man was horrible to him.

“He was released at the end of nine years, and went straight to America, where he became very successful in a pecuniary sense, and many a poor wretch was better off for having come into his pathway. And I—you know of my trouble with the bank. Well, owing to various causes which I couldn’t well help, I was involved to a much greater amount than my property was worth, and it was Alec who impoverished himself to pay the difference in value and get me clear again with a small start. It took all the money he had given Norah, as well as what he could raise, to do it. But nothing else would satisfy him, and I felt that I could eventually indirectly and otherwise, repay him.

“He is dying from this internal disorder. It cannot be long. The chill, combined with his illness, has

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been too much. And now, me little b'y, ye know the whole story, and perhaps ye may forgive me for the deceit. I thought once that you should be told, but later decided to leave things as they were. But now ye know."

Mr. Conough leaned back in his chair and looked steadily at Donald, his face very old and weary. Donald, filled with veneration and sympathy, scarcely knew what to say.

"It can all make no difference," he said at last, "Norah is Norah, and we can but love her the more now—if that be possible."

He held out his hand to Mr. Conough, who wrung it silently. Donald, at all times slow of speech, now could say nothing. The dominant thought within him was that it should be more than ever his special care to guard Norah, and stand by her through life, faithfully and lovingly.

At that moment there was a gentle tap at the door.

CHAPTER X

"**T**IS Norah," said Mr. Conough, rising. "Me little b'y, she is like her mother, and if she takes an idea that any particular course should be followed, she will follow it. I have talked this matter over with her. But I will leave it to yourselves. 'Tis best so."

He left the room as Norah entered. She was pale, but dressed with her usual care. Donald stepped forward quickly, holding out his hands. Norah took them, wondering at the pity and passion expressed on his face. But as he stooped his head she drew back, and held him away from her.

"No, no. Not that, Donald. Father—I—I mean Uncle—has told you?"

"Yes."

Norah gave a gesture of relief.

"I am very sorry there should be all this trouble about me—I thought to write to you, I—am very sorry."

Her voice had broken a little as she spoke, and she

could go no further just then. Donald could see she was utterly weary, and quite unlike herself from mere nervous exhaustion.

"Trouble!" he exclaimed. "It is you who have had the trouble. Why do you draw away from me? Don't you see, sweet, that now you are doubly mine, are doubly dear to me—if that were possible," he said eagerly. "What has just been told me can make no difference at all—not one little bit—except to draw you more than ever to me—me to you."

Norah shook her head.

"Dearest—it cannot be. Don't you see how—how I couldn't go on in the same way with you now. If you were less dear to me I might just let things drift, but my love for you will not let me burden you with a story such as mine is. It will all be known, for I will not go under a covering that is untrue. And for your own sake you must not marry me."

"Don't," cried Donald vehemently, "I want *you*—what does the outside world matter? I care little how it may regard us, and I suppose it cares as little for us. What have I to do with the opinions of others——"

"Much," interrupted Norah, "because you will love others as friends, you will value them and their opinions and ways of thinking——"

"Yes—if their opinions and ways of thinking are

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generous and just—not if they think in the way your words suggest.”

Norah shook her head again. Donald’s attitude, and directness of speech, brought her a great comfort, even though she had felt that he would so think. But her purpose was unchanged.

“You don’t seem to realize everything Donald. You see—I am a woman with a past,” in bitter jest, “and that past——”

“Is past,” said Donald. “Why concern ourselves with it? You are a woman with a future.”

“But it is often the past that shapes the future, and your future must be thought of, and your children’s future,” said Norah, looking steadfastly at Donald, with burning face. “You wouldn’t have it said that their grandfather was a convict, their mother a—a—oh, I cannot explain, but I *know* I must not marry you. Wrong has been done, and the wrong must stop with me. It is better that individual hearts should be crushed than that people should come to regard lightly the laws that have been laid down for their truest good. It is not a question of temporary comfort or happiness, but what will preserve, however stern the means, the spirit of goodness always. Nothing else matters.”

Norah stood at her full height, her gray eyes, unfath-

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omable in their depth, fixed on Donald. Never had she looked more beautiful than at that moment.

"All that you say may be true," said Donald slowly, "but I think I could find it in my heart to utterly disregard past or future, and sacrifice anything for the present."

"Oh, hush, don't speak so," said Norah quickly. "It's not worthy of you."

"It is true," exclaimed Donald, passion lending him a tongue. "What have I left if you—the sun of my life—for every man has a world within him of which some one woman forms the sun—go from me? But apart from myself I know that as to the future you speak of, your influence over those who may grow up about you will overbalance all the shadow of a dark past which *you* did not help to darken. And why should you for a—a conventionality, sacrifice your own happiness? Then surely the happiness of your father, and he has had his share of sorrow, surely his happiness and that of your uncle are bound up in you—their darling. If you now act as you propose doing, will it not hurt them cruelly, thinking, as they will do, that it is their fault. And consider——"

"I have considered until I am brain weary," said Norah, "and perhaps I may be wrong, following instinct rather than reason, or letting my own pride

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prevent my seeing what is right or even sensible. For after all," and she stood up very straight, "I have no recognized standing in the world, I am nobody in the eyes of regular folk, and perhaps I am too proud to let any of them do me the honor of raising me to a position beside them. I am free of their conventionalities, can shape my own course unrestrained by mere social ideas, and guided only by what my own heart and conscience tell me is true. I have not even a name, and can take whatever name I please."

"Then take mine, if it is worthy of you," said Donald simply, and looking at her as some study-worn astronomer might gaze at an unnamed star which had appeared on the horizon, and which he dreaded might sink any instant from view. Her face while she was speaking had lighted up with a wondrous pride and beauty. Now at Donald's words it became grave again.

"Don't mind my hasty speech, Donald," she exclaimed. "But cannot you see how it is? I've got to begin things over again. My past was on a wrong foundation; even the traditions and memories of childhood are changed to me, and I *did* want to cling to them. Her whom I called mother, and who was all that a mother could be to me, I must now learn to call by another name. And my dearest father—I mean

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Uncle Owen—oh,” she cried, breaking off, “it is all too full of pain to think of. And they all loved me, everything they did was for my happiness. Yet I am glad to know the truth. And my real father—the generous impulsive man, so brave with all his sin and sorrow. Donald, I would have shot that coward just as he did!” Her eyes flashed. “And the mother whom I have never seen. You have not seen her picture! Father has it with him. She is strangely like me, Donald.”

“I scarcely grasp all the change there is,” Norah continued after a pause. “Things have fallen about me, and I feel so strange sometimes. It is hard to express things, dearest, but to me it seems utterly impossible for us to go on just as if nothing had happened. All the past is like a far-off sweet dream, and this is the awakening, from which my real life begins.”

“Then I too will begin now and will win you afresh. There is nothing strange in my love for you. It at least is a reality, now and always.”

“You mustn’t speak like that,” said Norah. “It cannot be, at least, don’t you see that things must work out a little. I feel like one groping in darkness. You must give me time. One duty is to my hand now—setting me a definite path without my having to choose my own immediate course. Father may not live many weeks, and my presence seems to give him a comfort

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nothing else can. Just think, Donald, of all his years of sorrow and imprisonment—such sorrow as words cannot express. All those years he thought of me and loved me, yet gave no sign that I was his daughter, so that I might not suffer. And think of his generosity to father—I mean Uncle Owen,” she said with a weary gesture. “We would have been penniless but for him. It was he who gave me Fidget,” she added, while a faint smile played over her face. “Now I will stay with him.”

“I cannot but approve,” said Donald. “But I do not give you up in the least, Norah. I know my own strength. You may leave me voluntarily, and I will bear it somehow, but you will come back to me at last. Don’t you see, you *must*,” said he simply.

He looked at her, his dark eyes aglow.

“Oh,” said Norah drearily, “I don’t seem to have any definiteness left, only I feel that things cannot be just as they were. I do love you, Donald.” Her voice trembled a little, “but don’t urge me any more, lest in a moment of passion I might forget what I think is my duty. On your honor, Donald! You can see from what you have heard to-day how far-reaching is the wretchedness caused by any lapse from duty. Separated from me, you will be better able to realize my point of view—if I have one,” she added with a half smile.

"I only realize that you are the one woman in the world for me. I care for nothing else. But I will not distress you by urging you further now. Dearest—what can I say? Your happiness must be before every other consideration, and if I could only help you in all your trouble—you—you see," he went on painfully, "you have erected a barrier between us, and though my chief desire at this moment is to comfort you—aid you—I feel helpless to do it. Now you will go away with your father. It's right, and I will not even write you while you are away, or urge you to alter what seems now to be your conviction; but believe always that I love you, and that if you say 'Come,' I will come. Just now you're overtired and unstrung, and inclined to look at things not in their true proportions. But that will pass, and soon you will see that our separation is not to be thought of."

"I don't know," said Norah, looking at him with steady eyes. "We must leave it to the future. I think what was can never be again. Forgive me, Donald, I am so obstinate, so willful. But I only want to do the right; I love you—I—" and there she broke down altogether in an outburst of hot tears.

CHAPTER XI

DONALD, after Norah left him, sat for a time without moving. He could scarcely be said to be thinking—rather thoughts were flooding in upon him.

Presently a footstep sounded on the veranda, and Theresa appeared in the doorway—it was the room in which he had seen her last before her departure for Sydney.

“Here is something to refresh you,” she said, setting before him a cup of tea and some thin bread and butter—thus causing a repetition of history in a small way. “You look tired.”

Donald had little heart either for her presence or the refreshments. Nevertheless he drank the tea, and made a pretense of eating. Theresa sat opposite him at the little table, and talked on general subjects while he drank. It was only upon his rising to leave that the talk became in any sense personal.

“You have been here frequently for days past, yet I have scarcely had a chance to speak to you. That was not very friendly.”

“You may be certain I meant no unfriendliness.”

NORAH CONOUGH

"Oh, I know. It was just that your thoughts were elsewhere. I shall at least take advantage of the few minutes you can spare to congratulate you. So you are to be married!"

"It is my very great wish," replied Donald, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. In what way could such a question be answered after all that Norah had that evening said. Theresa could not have chosen a more exasperating time to speak of personal matters.

"And is that quite a reason for passing former friends as if you scarcely saw them," said Theresa, in a voice somewhat hard.

"It is no reason at all," Donald answered at once. "And I am not conscious of doing any such thing."

"Yet you have avoided me—somewhat," said she, in a voice that compelled reply.

Donald hesitated a second. It seemed harsh to speak the truth, yet there could be no other course.

"Yes, I did," he said.

"Were you afraid of meeting me too often?"

"No," answered Donald, somewhat desperately. "You compel me to be brutal. You know how you, in a sense, attracted me—almost fascinated me, I think, prior to my meeting the lady whom I wish to marry. When I met her the attraction ceased. I could not help it. It was just so, that is all."

NORAH CONOUGH

"Oh," said Thesesa, looking steadily at him, her color mounting.

"Can we not be friends?" urged Donald. "It was for your sake—not mine—that I avoided personal meetings with you. I very much wish to be friends."

"You wish to be friends," Theresa said slowly. "That is very nice and kind. You avoided me to save my feelings. Poor soul—I might have hurt myself looking at you. Kind, indeed!"

Donald felt that the atmosphere was becoming electrical. Theresa's fine eyes were stormy, and her cheek flushed. She looked very handsome as she stood before him—fronting him with the lamplight on her face.

"Do you know," she said suddenly, "that you are a prig."

"Possibly," replied Donald. "But it is idle talking like this. I know what my feelings and thoughts are. They may be those of a prig, but I trust they are those of a sincere man. My words are lame and ill-express my meaning, but there is nothing lame about my sincere desire for your happiness. Now let me go."

Still she stood before him.

"You have expressed several wishes this evening. You 'wish' to be friends with me. You 'wish' to marry Miss Conough, and frankly I don't wonder at it.

NORAH CONOUGH

But you have not yet told me if you are to be married. Are you?"

"Yes, we are," replied Donald, perhaps rather vehemently. As he spoke he felt quite sure that his words were the truth—how could such an imaginary obstacle as Norah, in her highstrung condition, had raised, stand for long between them.

"Yet you were not *quite* sure a few minutes ago."

"I am going to marry Miss Conough," was the dogged reply. The bare uttering of the words seemed to contain infinite comfort and reassurance.

"Well, I suppose I must say good-bye," said Theresa. Her tone gave much more than the commonplace meaning to the words.

"If you must," said Donald. "But why cannot we be friends?"

She looked at him unsteadily for a minute.

"Do you remember our last parting in this room?" she said.

"Yes."

"Then you have your answer."

Her words were stormful, and her utterance uncertain. Yet she controlled herself, and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said softly. "Good-bye."

Her face was near his, her eyes luminous with internal fires, whose glow was softened as she uttered the words.

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Donald took her hand very gently. He felt utterly sorry and helpless. She put her other hand out, and so held both his. She seemed the very embodiment of passion, and it would have been strange if, so close to her fiery spirit, he had felt unmoved, nor caught something of its glow. His face softened.

"Let me talk a little," she said, still very gently. "These long weeks I have been away—those wretched seven days I have spent at home—you owe me something for them all. I may be unwomanly—I don't care. I have felt your kisses and almost fainted in your embrace. It is too late to be silent, to stand dumbly by, like a stricken animal. Here I am—as you have made me. I love you—you made me love you. If you had only a bird with a broken wing, you would do something for it—if only to put it out of its misery. What are you going to do with me—ah, what!"

Her voice utterly broke, her arms were round Donald's neck, her hot face against his. Then the old glamour for a second awoke—he crushed her to him, his kiss savaged her lips. But it was the fierce expiring flame of a passion which he had thought dead. It flared tempestuously for a moment, then sank, and went out for ever, leaving in Donald's mind a kind of horror at what he had done.

"Oh!"

NORAH CONOUGH

Donald thrust Theresa almost violently from him. She sank into a chair at the table, sobbing as if her heart would break, her face buried in her arms.

In the doorway stood Norah, her face blanched, her eyes filled with amazement, as at something past the power of belief.

"I had wanted Miss Greentree, I—oh!" she said again.

She turned and walked swiftly back toward her father's room, her feet, on which were the soft slippers she used in the sick room, making no perceptible sound.

Donald sprang after her.

"Norah," he called softly but insistently.

She turned for a moment.

"I hardly think it is necessary for us to have further speech, Mr. Southerden," she said.

"It is necessary—things are not as you must think."

"I understand perfectly. There is no need for any explanation whatever."

"There is," he said. "But I can't make it," he added after a pause.

The English language, at all events, is hardly adequate. It is a language more fitted for men of honor.

"I can't make it," he said doggedly. "I wish speech were never invented. It hides what plain men want to express. But if it were fifty times more expressive—I could not explain."

NORAH CONOUGH

He felt apart, from the bitter resentment against himself, that he had no right to enter into explanations regarding Theresa's passion for him. It was hers, and sacred.

"No, you could not," said Norah. "Really, though, the matter is very simple. You have outraged—and what a time you choose—what I thought the highest and holiest thing that ever came into my life, and you have been kissing the landlady's daughter in the bar parlor."

"No, no—not that at all," said Donald, in speech that was almost a cry.

"Yes, just that. If it were a question of a great crime, a mighty passion—one could understand. But a trivial, vulgar episode, in what is little better than a tap-room. No, there is indeed nothing to be said."

She turned, and Donald still made as if he would follow.

"Please understand," she said, again facing him, "that I very distinctly desire to have no further acquaintance with you."

"Then you are unjust and unreasoning. And you are utterly wrong. Go back to that bar parlor, as you are pleased to call it. Does a woman cry her heart out, as that one is doing, over a triviality?"

NORAH CONOUGH

"Oh, this is too much," cried Norah. "Do not ever dare to speak to me again."

Rapidly she went along the veranda, overwhelmed by the tumult of outraged feeling which possessed her. At such a time, after such a meeting between them, to so cheapen her love, her woman's pride in him, her woman's tenderness!

"I will dare, and dare again," said Donald, in low penetrative tones. "You cannot get away from me. If my words are at fault the silence of the night will speak for me, the hills you love will befriend me, the depths of the old forest, where you have ears for a thousand voices that call, will urge you back to me. Oh, I have allies—I don't need stupid speech. Nature—even your own woman's nature—will do all the talking. I claim to be a son of Nature, and if you will believe me—try to be sincere as even She. My last word is—I love you."

He turned and strode away. As he passed the room in which Theresa was he hesitated, then entered. She still sat at the table, her face in her arms. Gently he placed a hand on the soft mass of her hair.

"Good-bye," he said softly. "Do not grieve—things will right themselves somehow."

She did not move, and he went silently away, as from the house of those who mourn.

CHAPTER XII

HER prolonged fit of weeping left Theresa in a curiously apathetic mood. For days, even weeks, her nature had been working and striving toward one point—the endeavor to bind Donald irrevocably to her. Could she but, even for a time, overmaster him through the passion for her which she had thought might still be in existence, could she but lure him into a promise to marry her, she felt that even if in a calm moment he was desirous of breaking away from her, yet he would not do so without her consent. The result of a recognized attachment between them would be to throw them together more often and more intimately. That, she had no doubt, would ultimately lead to her triumphing over his wavering love, and binding him to her in reality as well as by the promise she had hoped to obtain. Of the future, of her adaptability and power to take her place by his side, she had no doubt. No lady wife would better take a place in his life. She could learn, and serve, and by means of her magnetism and beauty, lead.

So, in her pagan imaginings, she had reasoned the

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matter out, and justified her desires in her own eyes. But, when she saw Norah, cold doubts of her own power had sprung up, and though she felt that for a last moment she had stirred his passionate man's nature to its very depths, yet Donald's attitude to her, the look on his face as he left her to follow Norah, even his subsequent words of farewell as he laid his hand on her hair, showed her the utter hopelessness of her love.

Her wild outburst left her not in a condition that could be described as despair, but rather as one lacking feeling or the power to suffer. It was neither despair nor cheerfulness, but merely the inevitable calm, as of exhaustion, after a storm which had swept through every particle of her. As she went about her work in the week following Norah's departure with her father the customers of the place noted little difference in her except perhaps that her manner was quieter than of old, even to the extent of being, a thing hitherto quite foreign to her, somewhat languid.

But there was one who noticed a difference, and that was Nicholas the Rooshian. His passion for her, especially since his talk with Donald, had passed through the tumultuous stage, and become an equally powerful but now steadily burning flame that nothing could quench. Every instinct in him was quickened, and with all came a gentleness of manner that drew passing

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thoughts of wonder from his associates. Love for Theresa had transformed the man. Very soon she, despite her preoccupation, noticed his attitude toward herself—his abstention from drink—the absence of former roughness of manner. And as her active temperament once more began to hold sway, and the deadly pain of her disappointment to possess her, the presence of Nicholas, his devotion to her and the thought that at all events here was one as to whom there could be no doubt, began to have a great comfort in it. His attitude to her was so doglike in its devotion, yet so essentially manly. She found herself nearer to him, even if only in friendship, than had ever before been the case.

But it was not in human nature, not at all events in a nature such as that of Theresa, to go through the passion which had possessed her without having it flung back upon herself—without reaction following upon reaction. The inevitable happened with Theresa. Her nature, at once crude, passionate, and of no great depth, was caught in the whirlpool, or rather whirlwind, of restlessness. She knew not what she wanted, nor cared greatly what became of her. To add to her irritation she felt that she must inevitably make it clear to Norah that the situation between herself and Donald on which Norah had chanced arose rather through her fault than his, and by no design on his part. And with

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this feeling came a bitter unreasoning resentment against Norah, and a dumb resistance to any action that would heal the breach which had arisen between her and Donald, or that would relieve the pain which she knew Norah must be feeling. Daily she pushed from her the impulse to write Norah—daily it returned.

Nicholas, who had felt that perhaps he was gaining a foothold in her regard, watched the further change in her with almost sullen apprehension. Then he asked her to be his wife. She did not refuse him, neither did she accept him, but left him in a torment of uncertainty, and a feeling as of a mouse, weary of being sported with, that would fain know its fate. And yet, as of a mouse that had no wish to escape, but was possessed with a consuming desire to continue the game to a triumphant issue, if such a thing could be.

Hitherto Theresa had kept men at a distance, but now within a week or two came a half-dozen suitors, plucking up heart from the encouragement given. Nicholas watched with smoldering resentment, not against the men, but rather against Theresa, and deep down in his heart, perhaps unconsciously, against Donald, the primary cause of all the trouble.

Foremost of the suitors came Jack Callaghan—Handsome Jack, as he was called by his associates. Since Nicholas had fought and beaten him, Callaghan

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had been seldom at the Deep Creek Inn, but now chancing one day to go there, and finding Theresa in a particularly gay and, as he imagined, encouraging mood, he at once began to frequent the place, regardless of the somber antagonism of Nicholas. Callaghan had an evil reputation, but with his six feet of lithe activity, his sleepy blue eyes, and long blonde moustache hiding the worst feature of his face, the mouth, he was a man to take the eye in a certain way.

Nicholas sullenly exasperated, Theresa wild and reckless, and Callaghan delighted, and assiduous in his attentions to her—such was the situation when contrary to her mother's wishes and contrary to what she herself would have done a short time before, she went on a long-pressed visit to Callaghan's sister-in-law, Mrs. Cranton, who kept a roadside public house at Callac, fifteen miles from Deep Creek.

She had not been there a week when she began heartily to wish herself at home. Mrs. Cranton, hitherto a chance and somewhat loudly dressed but apparently good-natured and well-behaved acquaintance at races and other country meeting places, now appeared in her true light as a coarse-minded woman whose talk made Theresa's ears burn. The house she kept had a bad reputation, and had more than once come under the ban of the police. The men Theresa

met, intimates of Callaghan, and Callaghan himself, disgusted her by manner and by speech, and on more than one occasion drove her to take refuge in her room, there in her accumulated misery to indulge in angry tears. But she had at the outset told Nicholas she would stay for the Callac races—still a fortnight ahead—and a certain dogged pride and determination she possessed made her resolve to stay.

Callaghan's attentions daily became more pressing, Mrs. Cranton enjoyed and encouraged the situation, and Theresa in bare self-defense was forced to reverse her ill-calculated policy of reckless encouragement, even to the extent of hourly snubbing, or rather trying to snub, her too-forward suitor. Two parties with a certain degree of perception are required before the one can inflict an effective snub upon the other, and where his vanity was concerned Callaghan had little or no perception. The only effect of Theresa's attitude toward him was to make him more determined in his pursuit of her. To marriage he gave little thought—he might or might not marry her afterward, but he was determined to become engaged to her, and appear in the light, and with the privileges and opportunities of an accepted lover. With so vain and selfish a nature, non-success was all that he required to urge Callaghan to efforts that might have become almost frenzied had

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he not, in his shallow way, known the advantage to be gained by calculated coolness or heat, each at the right moment.

A week before the races came the crisis. Theresa in the twilight had wandered to a favorite haunt on the creek a quarter of a mile from the house. Callaghan saw her and followed. With studied directness, he asked her to be his wife. With equal but entirely unstudied directness she refused.

"Then you have been playin' with me," he said.

"I had no intention of doing so," she answered.

"But you did it," he said, "you thought to amuse yourself, did you!"

"I had no thought to amuse myself," she replied, "there was no amusement in it."

With sullen hatred she thought of the past few weeks, and of her foolish actions which, having no object but escape from herself, brought in their train the passion of such a man as this. She found herself, shrinking in abhorrence from him. Yet she felt that she herself was to blame. There was a good sporting instinct in the girl.

"Well, you haven't done with me yet," said Callaghan, looking hard at her. She did not flinch, yet her spirit shrank from him in alarm. His face, flushed with drink and passion, was close to hers, and the devil

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looked out of his eyes. Theresa had seldom felt fear, but she felt it then. It seemed as if he intended to offer her violence.

Suddenly he turned, and, with a reckless laugh, left her.

He paused ten yards away, the laugh still on his face.

"So you reckon you've done with me," he said. "Now, I think our acquaintance is only beginnin'."

It was not so much his words, as his manner, that made Theresa's blood run chill. He turned again and walked rapidly away, and she drew a deep breath. She had lost all her confidence. Yet her instinct told her she had narrowly escaped insult.

As soon as Callaghan was out of sight she set off home, and ran, and ran, till she reached the house and her room. There she flung herself on her bed, and cried as she might have done for her mother when a child. Strangely enough, however, Nicholas was the individual most prominent in her thoughts. For months she had known him as a devoted attendant, formerly as of some huge animal zealous in his affection but untamed and fierce, latterly as of a man with a fixed purpose and protective presence. Why had she heard nothing of him since she had left home! If only he were with her now, or near at hand, she would feel safe even amongst these horrid people.

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She almost made up her mind to return home the next day. But again Nicholas interposed in her thoughts. He had said she ought not to go to Callac. Her reply was that she best knew what she should and should not do. He had said that Mrs. Cranton's house was no fit place for her, her answer being merely to laugh at him. And she had thought when leaving home that the end of the first week would have brought Nicholas to see her. She had been so used to his devotion and ready—formerly, too ready—desire to protect, that now they were no longer at hand, she began to miss them a good deal. Why had he not come! At all events she would not go home before the time she had stated.

Next day came a reaction. After all, what had made her afraid? Callaghan's passion was simply a thing to be sorry for—she had never meant to hurt him! There was simply nothing of which to be afraid. His words were apparently full of a meaning which they did not contain—it would be in accordance with his boastful and extravagant nature to utter such words as those he had spoken on parting the previous day. There was no doubt that he had for the moment frightened her; none at all that she had now no fear of him. Even her pity for him grew less; she had heard so much of his loves that she felt sure one more or less could make no

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difference to him. A fortnight without seeing her would probably end the whole thing. Meanwhile she was thoroughly sick of her visit to Callac—the whole atmosphere of the place was nasty, and her hostess shallow, inquisitive, and with tainted imaginings. Yet would she stay the appointed time.

So the day of the races came. Next day would see her back at Deep Creek, and this dreary visit at an end. Theresa was confident that Nicholas would appear at the races, but he did not come. His apparent forgetfulness after all these weeks hurt more than she was prepared to admit. Callaghan paid her no particular attention during the day, but many of his and Mrs. Cran-ton's friends were present, and some of them treated her with a coarse familiarity that keenly offended her, though, indeed, in past days she had seen much of men of all types, some of the roughest, and many things that now displeased her would then probably have been passed with little more than a laugh as something inevitable. But those days now seemed altogether of the past.

In the evening came the usual dance. For the most part the dancers were well-behaved, but Callaghan and a few friends formed a section that threatened at times to make the proceedings little better than a tumult. The stalwart young mounted trooper on duty, however,

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kept things in order in a quiet good-humored way. Toward ten o'clock, Theresa, thoroughly wearied of herself and everything else, and angry that she had ever permitted herself to be the guest of Mrs. Cranton, was sitting at the end of the room in which the dance was progressing. The attentions of Callaghan and some of his friends had become so offensive that she had just made up her mind to do what several times she had already wished to do, and would have done but for Mrs. Cranton's urging, in a spirit by no means free from venom, to the contrary—go to her own room and there lock herself in. She felt that her hostess would only have been too glad to humiliate her, and she did not wish a scene.

"Now we'll do as we please," said Mrs. Cranton pausing at her side, "without any interferin' constable."

"Why, has he gone?" said Theresa.

"As good as gone. Come here, and I'll show you a wrinkle."

Theresa followed her to another part of the house, wondering what had happened.

"There," said Mrs. Cranton, with a giggle, as she entered a room, "don't he look nice?"

The constable was lying on a bed, and near at hand stood Callaghan and one or two of his associates.

Theresa looked for a moment.

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"Do you mean to say you drugged him?" she demanded.

"Don't it suit your fine idears?" sneered Mrs. Cranton. "Just a drop of something to keep him quiet. He'll sleep it off in no time, and wake up none the worse. He'll hardly know he had it, an' if he did he wouldn't be game to report that he was drinkin', an' went to sleep—although it was only one. The travelin' doctor gave me the prescription. Smart, ain't it! Would your ma like it," she asked, with a leer. Her face was flushed, and Theresa felt certain she was not quite herself.

"You set of curs," cried Theresa, her eyes flashing, "and you, you hateful woman, I'll not stay another minute in this house, and I'll have you out of it, too, all in good time."

"Not so fast, my beauty," said Mrs. Cranton. "I know your sort, for all your airs. You want tamin' a bit—if there was a man about with any pluck he'd do it."

White with indignation Theresa turned and walked rapidly away.

"Way there for the high-stepper," sneered Mrs. Cranton.

"Wait a minute, dear girl," said Callaghan, putting his hand on Theresa's arm. His face was thrust

near hers—the evidence of much drink was only too plain.

“Let me go at once,” she said, striving to free herself.

Callaghan with a laugh, thrust an arm around her waist.

“You must have your bit o’ play, but Jack Callaghan’s the man for you, after all, eh?” he said, drawing her toward him.

For answer Theresa struck him hard on the mouth with her open hand.

“Ha—the touchy beauty. I like the spirited ones,” he said, struggling with her. She got partly free, and her exertions suddenly brought her, disheveled and hot, into the well-lighted back part of the building, where half a dozen or more people were standing about.

They laughed as she appeared—such scenes were by no means uncommon in that house. They knew Callaghan, and thought the one was a match for the other in this by-play. Even excited as she was Theresa noticed that a sulky had just drawn up in the back yard not far away, but paid no heed to it. Then Callaghan threw both arms about her, and full in the eyes of the bystanders kissed her again and again, holding her close to him and laughing in a half-drunken fashion. In her struggles they tripped, and fell full length on the stone-paved way.

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"Let the girl alone, Jack, it's too bad," said a man standing near the door. "Play is play, but that's no man's game."

Theresa, her hair coming down and dust on her clothes, sprang to her feet, and stood there facing the crowd, her eyes flashing and face crimson. Callaghan, sitting on the ground, was laughing boisterously.

"It's only a joke," he said thickly. "She wants handlin' a bit."

"Do the Jezebel good," said Mrs. Cranton, beside herself in her anger against Theresa. The accumulated effect of Theresa's ill-concealed repugnance to her for the last three weeks was at its height.

"This has got to stop," began the man at the door, coming forward, but before he could say more, Nicholas the Rooshian thrust his way into the group.

"Get your things together," he said to Theresa, "an' I'll drive you home at once."

"You black brute!" exclaimed Callaghan, struggling to his feet.

"Keep away, Callaghan. I've no wish to hurt you," said Nicholas.

"Did you see—what he did?" exclaimed Theresa in low tones, looking at Nicholas.

"Yes."

"And you will do nothing?"

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"I will not hurt 'im. Please get your things an' come with me."

Nicholas spoke with forceful dignity, and his manner, rather than his words, constrained her to obey.

He took a step forward, and spoke almost into her ear.

"Quick, or there'll be trouble. I'll take care o' you, on'y do what I want now," he said rapidly.

"They've drugged the constable," she said with equal quickness. "He's in the end room off the veranda."

She turned to go to her room, confident that Nicholas could take care both of her and himself.

Next second Callaghan was upon him. Quick as thought Nicholas, dodging the clumsy rush, and with great dexterity and strength, pinioned Callaghan as a constable pins a refractory prisoner.

Nicholas knew the building well. Twenty feet away was a strong box of a room with no window out of which a man could get, and used for all sorts of lumber. Before the crowd quite realized what was happening Nicholas ran Callaghan through the open door and banged it to. The key was on the outside. Nicholas turned it and put it in his pocket.

Instantly arose an uproar from within. Nicholas, without haste, turned and faced the crowd.

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"I had to do that or hurt him. Let no man interfere with me. I'll interfere with no man," he said, slowly and distinctly.

There was a forcefulness in his manner and words that arrested the attention of all onlookers, and gave pause to the knot of Callaghan's personal allies.

"I'll stand by you, anyhow," said the man who had already proposed interfering on Theresa's behalf.

"Me, too," growled a bushman from Budjong.

Nicholas, heedless of Callaghan's yells and threats, strode forward into the light. As it fell full on his face one or two bystanders, who knew him well, looked at him in surprise. He seemed to have been transfigured. In his face was no anger, merely resolve softened by kindness. No trace of drink appeared on him who of old was always more or less under its influence. The face was thinner and less heavy in expression while no less powerful.

Mrs. Cranton planted herself squarely in his way.

"Do you think you're going to boss this 'ouse," she demanded. "Gi' me that key."

"I'll give it when I'm leavin'," he said, "an' that won't be long."

"Here, hand it over," the woman almost screamed.

"Take me to the trooper," said Nicholas, speaking in low tones so that she alone caught the words. "I

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want to make sure your devil's work hasn't hurt him. At once—or this house 'll be shut up in a month."

Mrs. Cranton hesitated, then Nicholas for the moment overbore her also. She was sorry that her boastfulness had led her into saying anything about the constable, but she knew Nicholas would see him at any cost, and it was best to go quietly. Rapidly she led the way, and in a few minutes Nicholas felt satisfied that the man would be none the worse when he awakened.

"See that no harm comes to him," he said, "or there'll be trouble."

"The fool will be all right. Anythin' else you'd like to inspect about the premises," she said tensely.

"No. I'm leavin' at once."

"Thank you kindly indeed," was the venomous reply.

A minute later Theresa appeared. Her things had already been packed in eager anticipation of her departure in the morning.

As she and Nicholas pressed through the somewhat excited throng, intending to go to the yard where Nicholas had hastily tied his horse, still in the sulky, they were suddenly jostled, and with a rush carried through a door and into the bar parlor. Half a dozen of Callaghan's friends seized Nicholas, loudly, more as

a pretext for their action than otherwise, demanding the key. But they had no idea of his strength. He shook them off and sent one to the floor with an open-handed buffet, and seizing the leader thrust him headforemost, and with a great crash, through the window.

"Don't be fools, boys," he said. "You'll get hurt. Now, Miss Greentree an' me are goin' out."

He bore straight down upon them, and Theresa kept close behind him in the lane he made, which opened with surprising rapidity.

Quickly they reached the sulky, and Nicholas carefully placed Theresa's belongings in it, and got up himself.

"I reckoned that by now things 'ud be more than you could stand."

"I must go with you, I suppose," she said. "But you saw what happened, and let the man off."

Her face burned at the very thought of the scene with Callaghan, and her resentment was great in proportion.

"It was your own fault," replied Nicholas. "You encouraged the poor fool knowin' well what he is, an' then would have me punish him for your folly."

Theresa had placed her foot on the step of the sulky, but as Nicholas spoke she took it down again.

"I shall not go with you," she said, in hot resentment.

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"Listen to me," replied Nicholas. "Nothin' I can say will tell you how well I love you. But my love is too big an' square an' fair-dealin' to do anything mean, an' it 'ud be mean to hurt Callaghan. He goes free for to-night's work. If you play with beasts you must expect nothin' better. I don't mind saying I could 'a' killed him—but I won't hurt him—not a hair. The whole thing ain't his fault—seein' what he was an' is, an' that you knew it. Women can tell a man like that, but you knew more than your own instinct told you. I've hurt too many. Please get into the sulky."

His eyes and Theresa's met in the half light, and the gaze held for a time. Then—she got into the trap.

A grim smile came over Nicholas' face.

"You always was a sport," he said. "Now I must give this key to Mrs. Cranton—I forgot. Hold the reins a minute."

He jumped down and returned to the house. Five minutes at least passed before he came back.

"I couldn't find her," he said. "I left the key with the man at the bar. Wonder some of them didn't break the door—it's too strong for Callaghan by himself."

A moment later they were bowling along the road behind the free-stepper which Nicholas drove. The weather was unusually cold, and the horse, chilled by standing still, made the pace at the outset.

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The road was narrow, and three hundred yards from the house ran straight downhill through green timber. The night was clear and starlit, but amongst the trees all was dark. Suddenly Theresa, with her keen eyes, had an impression as of a dark figure flitting across the track—the next moment she hurtled through the air and fell somewhere to the left of the horse, which had almost turned a somersault. In a moment she was up—a bruise or two hurting her severely—and at the horse's head. Dimly she wondered if she were seriously hurt. The horse stood trembling but quiet, and so far as Theresa could see no damage was done to the cart, or strangely enough, the harness. Where was Nicholas!

"I'm not hurt, are you all right," she called anxiously.

"Don't be afraid," he said in a queer voice, from a little distance. "I'll be right in a minute. Can't think how it happened."

Just at that moment something seemed to glide along at Theresa's feet. It could not be a snake—it was evidently of considerable length. A thought flashed through her mind. She stooped and in a second had grasped a stout rope. For a moment there was a vigorous pull at the other end, and Theresa, holding the rein with one hand and the rope with the other, felt as if her arm must break. Then the rope relaxed and

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Theresa heard a rustling, and the sound of rapid but stealthy footsteps. Instantly she drew the horse aside to a sapling close by, hitched the rein round a branch, then drawing her skirts above her knees, bounded after the person amongst the trees. A moment later she caught a glimpse of a dark figure, which hurried desperately for a short distance, then sank to earth. Immediately afterward Theresa almost stumbled over the prostrate figure, which she quickly identified as that of Mrs. Cranton—breathless and hysterical.

"Oh," sobbed the woman, "I've killed 'im."

"Come back with me instantly, and help," said Theresa. She almost dragged Mrs. Cranton to her feet, and, pushing and pulling, hurried with her back toward Nicholas.

"You tied a rope across," said Theresa, in fierce anger.

"Yes," whimpered the other. "I hitched the second end just as you was comin', but after couldn't get the other end off quick enough. I was too angry to think."

"Then help me."

By the time they had reached Nicholas, Mrs. Cranton had no breath or strength left. She sank in a heap while Theresa went to his assistance. He had fainted, and lay as one dead. All the latent motherliness in Theresa flooded through her as she strove to place him

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comfortably, thinking then to drive at full speed to the house for assistance. But almost immediately the coming of two horsemen was heard. She waited, and hailed them as their horses shied violently.

One had a flask of brandy, and Theresa forthwith moistened Nicholas' lips and wetted his temples with it. In a few minutes he was again conscious.

Meantime one of the men had driven back to the house and brought a stretcher, and on this the helpless man, in an agony of pain, was laid.

He smiled as, under the gleam of a lantern, he saw Theresa, and a glad light came into his eyes as she pressed his hand.

"Don't worry about me, I'm not dead yet," he said.

"How did it happen," asked one of the men.

"The horse fell coming down the hill. It was not Nicholas' fault," replied Theresa.

"Nasty place to fall," remarked the other.

Then the men raised the clumsy stretcher and staggered away under their heavy burden. Soon a crowd of willing hands reached them, and carefully Nicholas was borne along. Already a horseman was well on his way to Eurimbyn for the doctor.

"Jump into the cart, and we'll hurry on and get things ready," said Theresa to Mrs. Cranton.

She supported the half-hysterical woman—who had

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lain quite unnoticed beside a bush—for a moment, but the latter drew back, and with a guilty look round, said she would go home in a few minutes if Theresa would drive on.

“Oh, I’ll fix that,” said Theresa, in angry contempt. “Here, swallow some of this.” A moment later she had secured the rope and thrust in into the sulky.

The brandy—Theresa had chanced to keep the flask—revived Mrs. Cranton, whose courage began to return.

“What are you goin’ to do,” she said, half defiantly.

“Do! If Nicholas lives you will be safe. Men like him don’t prosecute women. And I won’t go behind him. I’ll say nothing—if he lives. Now hold your tongue, before I throw you out on the road.”

* * * * *

Nicholas was grievously hurt, with more than one bone broken. But he lived, and Theresa, after all, did not return home for nearly a month. She stayed, and in the battle for the hurt man’s life, so big was he, so helpless and patient, all the motherhood of her nature awoke and held sway. And in the understanding that came to her during the silent night watches, in the hours of sane practical attention to the details of the sick-room, in the moments of subtle mental union as the silent man’s eyes met hers, all Theresa’s sick imaginings over the past departed from her—forever.

CHAPTER XIII

PETER, one Sunday afternoon, lay on his back on the grassy bank of the big waterhole—hat over eyes, hands under head. Boiler was lying near, full length on his side with his scarred left ribs turned toward the sun.

After an hour or more Peter sat up and gazed round him, taking in the quiet beauty of the scene, and chewing a bit of kangaroo grass. He had quite recovered from his fall, but his face looked rather pinched, and the expression thoughtful and set while his eyes had a heavy appearance as if his sleep were not altogether refreshing. Yet their steel gray light, if more subdued, was kindlier than ever. Then his eye fell on the dog.

“Boiler,” said he in a friendly tone.

Boiler twitched one ear, wriggled his tail on the ground, and moved the stump of his amputated leg. He was in a very comfortable frame of mind, for had he not that very day bluffed three itinerant kangaroo dogs that rushed at him on the road, and had he not the night before had no end of a satisfactory ruction

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with a tiger-cat amongst Donald's newly acquired turkeys, as witness the fresh and severe scratches about his face and body!

"Boiler, old man," said Peter again in dog English, "you and me is two unfortunates."

Boiler acquiesced lazily and contentedly, and made a feeble snap at a fly.

"You've been wounded and knocked about and have lost a leg," Peter went on. "Your master is broke. Moreover, he has been banged on the head. Thirdly, he got a bad crack on the I—his Ego has been sorely hurt, Boiler. But the worst bang of all is the one he got here—here in the weskit."

Peter put his hand solemnly on his heart.

"But nobody will ever know except you—and somebody else who found it out, and she won't tell, and neither will you, eh, old ash-heap?"

Peter took off a boot, shook out a bit of gravel that had been tormenting him, laced the boot up again, and continued gravely:

"You know, Boiler, old cove, every woman is taken out of some particular man; he gives one of his ribs for her to be made with, and when he can't get the rib, made into a woman, back again, the place where it was taken from *aches*, same as a big toe that has been cut off. That's what they call heartache. But the spot is

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too sore to be touched, so not a word more. We aren't given to whining, old tripod. Let's go and see if we can rouse out those native cats we saw in the log fence yesterday."

Peter shook his head wisely, got up, stretched himself and yawned, then marched off with Boiler limping at his heels.

A month previous to this particular Sunday, Peter had ridden over to Eurimbyn, left his horse in the doctor's paddock, and gone to Sydney on business and pleasure and for a change.

On his return two days ago he called at Bringenbogie on his way home. Mr. MacKinnon was not at home, but he saw Mary and Mrs. MacKinnon and sat talking with them for a while. They were sitting in a bright room which overlooked the rose garden.

Presently Mrs. MacKinnon went out to attend to some detail of gardening which she had in mind, but first pressed Peter to stay to lunch and for a week if he could.

Peter wanted to get home that day for several reasons. So he excused himself, although as he looked at Mary he was sorely tempted to stay. The prospect of seeing her every day, and having some sport with a droll companion like her father between whiles, made him sigh for a week at Bringenbogie.

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He thrust the temptation behind him manfully, having made up his mind that for the present he would see as little of Mary as possible. A speculation in cattle in which he had lately been concerned with his brother-in-law had turned out badly, and within the last month he had lost a great part of his little capital. Therefore his pride would allow no sign of his love for the rich heiress of Bringenbogie to escape him. He registered a hard vow that he would some day gather together a sufficiency of the indispensable thing called money, and then who should hinder his wooing! But here he realized with a sickening of the heart how poor, for many a day to come, were his chances of putting himself into anything like a decent position; and in the meantime Mary might be gone from him. The thought almost determined him to throw aside the conventional ideas which hampered him and which in his heart he despised. But in the end pride always won the conflict.

"Well," said Mary, when her mother left the room, "give me some account of yourself and your doings in Sydney."

"I haven't been doing much. But first—are you well? You look pale," said Peter.

Pale she was, with dark rings round her eyes.

"Oh, blues, blues, blues," said she in the tone of a

Hamlet. "I want a change, and am going to have one. My head and other aches will soon be over."

"What are your other aches?" queried Peter.

"Can't be defined," was the reply. "But tell me of all your gaiety in Sydney."

"I don't know that I had any special gaiety," said Peter, trying to think what he had done, and whom he had seen in the metropolis. A visit to the Flemington salesyards got uppermost in his mind, and that would hardly come under the heading of gaiety. Mary spoke again before he had put together a mental list of his doings.

"You're a nice man to go to Sydney for a holiday and have nothing to tell me when you come back. Now, when I go away I have heaps of fun and do all sorts of interesting things that I shouldn't. I like to see things, and know things, and go to places where queer people go, and breathe some of the great breath of the world, even if it is occasionally a little strong. And I like a little uproarious fun sometimes; I like getting into innocent scrapes that shock that old reprobate, Mrs. Grundy. You know," she rattled on, "there are some girls who are just like children; in their naughtiness and glee they spin round until someone collides with them or the giddiness overpowers them. Then amid tears and laces and tumbled hair

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and a general mix up of pale prettiness they get a bad buster, and by and by reappear with their faces sweet and fresh wiped, ready for a piece of the solid bread and butter of life. I don't want the bread and butter yet—I haven't had half enough of the other, and I—I—don't know exactly what I do want or what I am driving at, but I'm going to cry now and chance it."

To Peter's astonishment she threw herself along the couch on which she was sitting, and shook with deep-drawn sobs. Peter, much concerned, waited quietly until the paroxysm had passed away, for he judged that the tears would relieve her. Presently she raised her head an inch and laughed a little, high-strung, nervous laugh.

"Here's a pretty go!" were her expressive words. "I'm too ashamed to look up, but promise me you'll never breathe a word about this—this display. But I know you won't," she went on quickly in a muffled voice. "Men like you do not gossip."

A small hand stole out from under her. Peter took it and it closed on his, then returned to cover. Suddenly she sat up very straight, thrusting her disordered hair back, and dashed away a stray tear.

"There, that howl has done me good, anyway. It's been working up for a week, and I've wanted it all the morning and somehow your genuine sympathy sprung a leak."

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There was silence for a moment, and then she rose and looked full into Peter's eyes.

"Peter, I'm not worthy of you. Why do you love me?"

The suddenness of the question, the use of his Christian name for the first time, the first mention of the word love between them, left Peter speechless for the moment, while the passion in his heart cried for speech—such speech as would show forth truly and emphatically his already betrayed secret which he thought he had guarded so well.

"You know you love me, and I——"

"Love you," Peter burst out, and in a few words he told of his love, for which he would now ask no return. "But," he said with simple directness, "if ever I am a more successful man than the poverty stricken individual you now see, then I will ask you to be my wife. You have guessed my love for you—I will never trouble you with it unless my position in the future shall justify me in asking you to marry me."

Inwardly Peter groaned, despising himself for bowing to his pride and to the world's opinion as to the relative rights—founded on other than love—of a man and woman in the matter of marriage.

"That is what I wanted to speak to you about," said Mary slowly and clearly. "Do you think any pitiful thousands of pounds would stand in the way if I could

love you as you deserve to be loved? Not for a moment—unless your pride were too great to allow you to take an heiress.” Her eyes grew slightly humorous. “But I can never marry you because I cannot give you the love a wife should give you. You are a true-hearted man, Peter,” she went on earnestly, “and I speak frankly because I think you should know the truth, and to prevent your living on false hope, and to save you the pain of suspense. It is silence that kills,” she said with deep passion in her voice, “uncertainty deeping in silence to certainty, and I value you too highly to let you suffer. Peter, do not think me cruel—I would not give you a moment’s pain if I could help it.” She looked at him pleadingly, almost timidly.

“I do not blame you in the least; I have nothing but tenderness for you—you sweet little woman,” and his voice trembled, “but I will not give up hope unless—” he paused.

“Unless what?” said Mary quietly.

“Unless there is somebody else,” he said quickly, looking into her face with searching anxiety.

Mary did not speak for several seconds, then—“You have a right to know,” she said slowly in a constrained voice. “There is somebody else,” and her lips compressed.

Peter stood very still, his face white and drawn. His

mind became busy, busy, for a few seconds, putting together many slight indications which now flashed through it carrying an intensity of meaning he had not perceived before. With quick intuition characteristic of him he gathered the truth of the matter.

"Can it be Donald," he said, in grave wonder and half to himself. But in a flash he recalled the situation, and groaned to think of the unpardonable slip he had made.

"How dare you. Oh, how dare you," cried Mary, looking at him with fierce dignity. "Leave me," she said vehemently, and unable to trust herself further she moved to the piano, and with her elbows on it and her chin in her hands she stared, without seeing, at a miniature of herself, while her form shook with the storm that swept through her.

Peter stood quite still for a time, while in his face determination, and love, and bitter disappointment strove for the mastery.

"It is Donald, then," he said at last in that calm sweet voice of his. "My speech was that of a blunderer, but I am glad I know. . . . Dear old Dan—simple, and true, and strong—he is worth a thousand of me."

Silence for a space, while the clock ticked loudly. Then Peter, battling with his grief, turned in quiet determination to Mary.

"Good-bye," he said gently. "Will you not shake hands?"

Mary made not the slightest movement, and after hesitating a few seconds, Peter walked slowly to the door. As he touched the handle, Mary spoke.

"Peter."

He paused, and turned his head without altering his attitude. He knew not what to say, and again the silence became painfully intense.

"Don't go like that," said Mary at last in a rapid whisper.

Peter's hand fell to his side again and he moved toward her. She did not move, but still stared into the miniature.

"Miss MacKinnon," Peter began in a constrained voice.

"Call me Mary," she said quickly.

Peter's lips opened slightly, but no sound left them. All other feelings were swallowed up in his compassion for the little woman before him, and of what use were words!

Mary turned suddenly, and looked up with feverish defiant eyes into Peter's. Something she saw there softened her glance. She put out both her hands, which Peter took in his, and so they stood gazing at each other like two little children.

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"Dear Peter," she said gently and slowly, "So brave, so kind—I do love you with all my heart, but not in that way," hurriedly, "perhaps in a better way. I leave for Sydney early in the morning, and next week will be on my way to Europe."

"Europe!" cried Peter.

"Yes, Europe. It was decided quite suddenly while you were away."

Again there was a long pause.

"It is best that I should go away. My heart is full of pettiness," said Mary at last.

"No,"—from Peter in strong tones.

"Yes," she said. "And I want work. It kills me to be here. I can't play the hypocrite any longer. I could not kiss Norah—yet." She shuddered slightly. "I will work and will become a great singer. It is in me. Some day perhaps I shall sing the smallness out of myself."

They stood quiet for a time. Mary was the first to break the silence.

"And now we will say good-bye. No—here—now" she said quickly as Peter interjected something about seeing her again. "It is better so. My father comes with me to Sydney. My mother is coming, too, but—she and I have scarcely spoken three words in three months except before strangers. Mother hates me, I

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think, and I don't seem to care. Some day I will make her love me. I *can* do it," closing the confident mouth. "I can always do it when failure does not mean too much, and—that cannot happen again."

Silence once more for a space, then——

"You must go now, dear. Good-bye," she said, and gently disengaging her hands from his, she put them on his temples, drew his head down, and kissed him on the forehead.

White and dumb, Peter took her hands in his again and pressed them hard, looking long into her face, while he seemed scarcely to breathe. Then quietly loosening his hold, he turned, took up his hat, and stepped into the garden, where he found Mrs. MacKinnon tying up a rosebush.

"What, leaving us so soon," she said.

"Yes, I must go," he replied in a steady voice.

He said good-bye to her, mounted his roan, and rode away over unreal ground, through unreal sunlight, where all was a dream that would soon fade. Or so it seemed to him. Mrs. MacKinnon looked after him with a whimsical but friendly expression in her eyes.

"I have seen that expression on a man's face before," she murmured. "The old story!"

With a dainty shrug of her shoulders she finished tying up the rose bush.

CHAPTER XIV

OUR struggles and cries in sorrow are as those of a swimmer borne through a perilous passage on the everflowing stream of life. After a few plunges and rebellious splashings we may again, to outward appearance just as usual, swim onward. Perhaps we have been saved from drowning by the friendly hand of a fellow swimmer, or by clinging to the raft of Hope, or perhaps half choked and exhausted, we float inert for a time whithersoever the stream pleases to carry us. We may be content to drown quietly without further effort, or it is more probable that when we recover ourselves a little we again strike out boldly to keep up with or out-distance fellow swimmers, and we take a delight in renewed effort, finding also that there is many a bit of enjoyment to be had as we swim along.

Passing over any splashings that Donald may have made when the stream of circumstance bore away from him, her whom he would fain have retained always at his side, we find him shortly after Norah's departure once more on his selection, setting himself to get through the ensuing weeks. The thought that Norah might

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never again be to him as she had been was thrust aside as a dreary impossibility. Yet—it persistently returned and troubled him. Write to Norah he would not, apart from the fact that his instinct, in time of trouble, was always for few words.

It is said that love is blind. But too often he is merely shortsighted, and can see just far enough ahead to fill him with doubts and fears for what lies beyond his range of vision. The lover just separated from his beloved, and with his eyes too much fixed on his inward grief, thinks that all is over with him. The foolish fellow should lift up his head and take a sweeping view of things in general; see what he and other folk have already come through, and endeavor to calculate the possibilities that lie in the future. But then again—Love is a bad calculator—can seldom put even two and two together properly. Either two and two make (approximately) a hundred and forty, or less than nothing, according as Hope and Despair alternate. So Donald may be pardoned for occasional fits of gloom, although, indeed, his chiefest concern was not for himself but for Norah and those dear to her.

Meanwhile there was abundant work for a willing hand to do on his own and Peter's selections. Donald applied himself to it with such vigor, and the quantity of improvements he effected in a short time was so

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extraordinary, that even Peter, who knew the energy of the man from of old, remonstrated with him.

"Let me alone, Peter, boy," he said. "It is my only means of relaxation."

Peter was now on his own selection, and he and Donald of course did not see so much of each other as when they were living together, often not meeting for days. Donald made trips to The Waterholes two or three times a week, and he and Mr. Conough held many an earnest conversation, though Donald never referred to the cloud which had arisen between him and Norah. The old man was full of sadness, of the present and of the past.

The ensuing season proved to be very wet; day after day it rained drearily, and day after day Donald went about his work more or less wet through. There was trouble everywhere—creeks flooded, fences washed away, mails delayed or lost, and all day a splash, splash under foot, and, with intervals, a patter, patter overhead.

After a time it chanced that Peter went away for a fortnight on business. Mr. Conough also happened to be away at the same time, so that Donald had seen scarcely a soul for days. Toward sunset on the day of Peter's return Donald rode up to his abode. Peter had finished tea, and was even then thinking of riding

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across to Donald's place. The latter gave Peter's hand a wrench that made him wince, then they interchanged questions on matters of immediate interest in connection with the daily routine on their selections.

"I've been out all day," said Donald at last, "after some infernal steers that got through a washaway. Found them all right. But what's the use of having cattle in a season like this—rain, rain, rain. They falling away every day instead of holding their condition for a winter sale. It's going to rain some more, too. I'm full of this, Peter. Slush and bullock and eat and sleep—that about sums it up. You bullock all day, and you're wet all day; you get home to a dark hut and light a fire with damp bark, and scrape together a bit of tucker with never a soul to speak to you; you make your bed and go to sleep, and get up and scrape together a bit more tucker and bullock all day again, and you might as well be a dog. I hate the sight of the damned place."

"Steady, old man. Have you had any tea to-night?" said Peter.

"No. I don't want any. Might have a pot of tea. Don't want anything else."

"When did you have anything?" demanded Peter.

"Oh, this morning. Never mind that steak, Peter. I don't want it."

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Donald was sitting on a box, hands clasped and elbows on knees, gazing at the floor between his feet. Peter looked at him curiously, put on the steak, and proceeded to set the table.

"I'm going back to sheep as soon as I can get out of this," Donald went on after a few minutes silence. "I'm hungry for the smell of 'em. I want to get my hands in the wool, and feel it, and look at it, and stand back and blow about it, and top the market once more if I can."

"Here you are, old chap—fall to on this," said Peter, setting the steak, grilled to a nicety, on the table. "Meat and a merry heart go together. This licks even the smell of a merino. You're a bit worn out, you see. Your system wants patching up a little, and there's no patch so good as a big piece of steak. Black eye or black spirit—it cures 'em both if properly applied. Now, I'm going outside to attend to an odd job or two and won't interrupt you while you have the nose-bag on."

Donald, growling something about not being hungry, drew up to the table. When Peter returned half an hour later he found that Donald had finished his tea, and was putting the hut in order.

Peter looked at the empty plate, a twinkle in his eye.

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"He'll do yet," he murmured. Then aloud—"Come on, Dan. There's a fool of a cow bogged at the bottom of the horse paddock. I think we can get her out without a horse. Don't know how the deuce she got in."

They took ropes and a lantern and spade and started off.

"There are those beastly clouds again," said Donald, as they tramped along. "Jerusalem, it's dark," as he tripped violently over a short stump.

"Isn't it!" said Peter. "Almost as dark as the night we camped near Forbes, and you hobbled the old gray docker with one hobblestrap round his near fetlock and t'other round a sapling."

Donald could not but laugh over the recollection. "My hands were too numb with the cold to tell what I had hold of," he said. "Good job the old horse was quiet. Wonder what he thought of it. He was there in the morning, all right."

"But do you remember," Peter began again, "the night down the Lachlan when the cattle rushed, and we had a race trying to head each other? You roared, 'Whoa back there, you old devil!' and I nearly jumped out of the saddle. Thought you and the old docker were a bullock right enough. It was dark then, if you like."

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"Yes," said Donald, "and do you remember—" and away he went into reminiscences of other days, Peter chiming in, till presently they reached the cow.

It was an arduous task getting her out, but by the use of much science and muscle—Donald's great strength was invaluable on these occasions, and Peter was no weakling—they got her out and upon her feet, Donald steadying her by the tail. He held her a little too long, and, with the usual ingratitude of a beast freshly pulled out of a bog, she turned on him, he still holding her by the tail. Round they went, and Peter by the light of the lantern could dimly see Donald stepping wildly over the sticks. A tree came into the way and the cow circled violently into it. Donald came against it rather hard, but seized the opportunity to let go the tail and get clear.

"That's gratitude," he said, rubbing himself.

When Peter had managed to get his laughter under control they went home.

"You'd better doss it here to-night," said he.

"Intended to," replied Donald. He put away the rope and lantern, then walked over to the fire, where Peter was standing.

"Peter, boy," he said taking his brother by the arms, "you've done me the world of good to-night. I was near mad, I think."

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"I know," said Peter, his arms half crushed by the grip on them.

Donald sat down and proceeded to take off his boots, and Peter leaned against the table looking at the fire, his arms folded.

There was silence in the hut for two or three minutes, then Donald, with a fierce mutter, smashed a bootlace that wouldn't untie, and wrenched off the boot. Peter stood up, stretched himself, and yawned.

"It's a rum world, eh, old wireworks?" he said. "Stand your boots against the log. They'll dry better there."

After the operation Alec Conough's health for a time improved. But as the weeks went on, Norah wrote more and more anxiously, and finally Mr. Conough decided to return to her. His intention was hurriedly put into execution on receipt of a telegram from her asking him to come at once, as she believed her father to be dying.

Shortly after Mr. Conough had gone Donald and Peter found it convenient one day to call at The Water-holes for dinner. Afterward they sat in the shade of the back veranda, talking of those in Sydney. Billy, having washed up, had hunted out all his master's uncleaned boots, old and new, and was putting a

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mirror-like polish on them. Those that were cleaned he put in a row on a stool, calling them "The Upper House." The others he left on the floor until cleaned, and they constituted "The Lower House."

"You see, the Upper House chaps is supposed to be a bit more shiny than th' others," he explained.

While Peter and Donald talked Old Billy's brush could be heard inside the kitchen polishing with a vigor that never abated. Occasionally he would appear at the door with scraps of information on general subjects. He was out of earshot when inside.

"I wonder what became of that man Thomas Hayford," Donald was saying to Peter just as Billy happened to be seized with a sentiment which he came to the door to deliver, brush in one hand, the other hand thrust up a boot. He caught the name.

"I knew a chap named Thomas Hayford. He died in the hospital at Brisbane," said Old Billy. "I reckon you're about ready for the Upper House," addressing the boot.

"Are you sure, Billy?" said Donald, becoming interested, and referring to Billy's first remark.

"Well, I heard he did," replied Billy. "It was about ten years ago. And just before that I saw him—the time the boss bought the Louisa Vale cows up there in Queensland. I went as cook, and he happened to be

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there in Queensland. I went as cook, and he happened to be there for a day, and he looked like a dead man then—had the Barcoo rot and other complaints besides.”

“It mightn’t be the same man,” said Donald, half to himself.

“This cove was dark—a big man, mustache and side levers, and a scar on his temple, and black curly hair goin’ gray. He was no good—them chaps with curly ’eads never is any damn good,” said Old Billy, appearing with a fresh boot.

“Must be the same man,” said Donald to Peter.

“I knew him years before that; him and his brother Frederick.”

“That settles it,” exclaimed Donald.

“I was trainin’ a horse for him up near Bourke, and I never seen a man who could make himself so nasty—even to his wife—though no one could be fairer spoken at first.”

The brothers exchanged a quick glance.

“He treated her like a dog,” said Old Billy. “Nice girl she was, too, and he left her without a shillin’, and went somewhere down South. She was glad to be rid of him. She’s livin’ near Lismore now.”

“What!” exclaimed Donald. “He has a wife living! Who was she and when did he marry her?”

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"She was Mary Woolcott, daughter of a publican, a very pretty girl. He married her—let's see—it was just before I broke my leg off one of his 'orses, because she come to see me, and she was only just married then. That was in June, sixty-seven—no, sixty-six. June, sixty-six, that was it. She married him just before that."

Here was certainly a revelation.

"You must tell me all about this, Billy. I want to know," said Donald quietly.

Old Billy looked a little surprised, but gave Donald a curiously circumstantial account of all that he knew about Hayford and of his marriage with Mary Woolcott.

"Look here, Peter," said Donald when they were alone, "I believe that scoundrel married Norah's mother after he married this Mary Woolcott. I won't rest till I know all about it."

It is unnecessary to follow Donald in his researches which included a trip to Lismore specially to see Mary Woolcott, or Hayford. He ascertained that Hayford was already married when he went through the marriage ceremony with Norah's mother. Her marriage with him was therefore a nullity, and her subsequent marriage with Alec Conough valid.

When certain as to his facts Donald wrote Mr.

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Conough. He was beginning to look for a reply when a telegram came announcing the death of Alexander Conough. Three days later came another telegram that Mr. Conough and Norah would be leaving for home on the second day following.

Donald at once decided that he would meet them at Eurimbyn. Mr. Conough would expect him, and Norah—well, he would see her. He could wait no longer. And he felt that in the first moment of their meeting he would know his fate. Her greeting might be in commonplace words, but Donald thought nothing of words. They served to obscure or to hide rather than to express realities. He would look for what lay behind them. The thought that she might not greet him at all never entered his head, as it might that of a man of smaller or commoner mould. People with brains and understanding, whose lives are thrown together by locality if nothing else, do not “cut” each other. Such devices remain for the poorer types of intelligence.

Donald possessed one two-wheeler, and Mr. Conough another. They were the only light vehicles at either establishment. There would be luggage as well as the two passengers, so both traps were taken. Peter drove one and Donald the other, while Billy rode in on Fidget, who was looking splendid. Billy thought the

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welcome to his young mistress would not be complete unless Fidget were there.

Donald reached Eurimbyn slightly in advance of the other two. As he drove into Doctor McLennon's stableyard—the doctor's house was now a recognized rendezvous for those of his country friends to whom he was specially attached—he saw a white head over the tall paling fence between the house and the stable, and a moment later Mr. Conough was grasping his hand. The old man and Norah had arrived rather sooner than they had expected, having in fact slept at the Doctor's house on the previous night.

"Go in and see Norah," said Mr. Conough after the first greetings. "She doesn't know ye are here. Doctor and Mrs. McLennon both had to go out this morning, and Norah is in the sitting room."

Donald went into the house and knocked gently at the sitting-room door.

"Come in," called a well-known voice.

Donald opened the door, stepped just inside, and stood still. Norah, who was sitting with a book in her hand near a window, sprang to her feet, startled and with a heightened color. Their eyes met, and—that glance said everything. Donald entirely forgot the phrases which he had meant his tongue to utter, and was hardly conscious of the words he did speak.

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"Have you come back to me, Norah," he said, his voice strong but with a tremor in it, while he raised his arms involuntarily. A second later her head was on his shoulder, and one of his hands was tightly clasped in hers.

It was long before either spoke. Then at last Donald held her at arms length and looked at her. She was pale, and her strongly marked brows showed wonderfully dark against their white background. He held her eyes for a time with his, but at last they fell, and no longer would she be held at arms length. Tears were not far away.

Then Donald made what, with a woman of another type, might have been a blunder. He tried to put into words a thought which had been running in his brain, forgetting his own theory that all misunderstandings arise from a too free use of speech, which can seldom be anything but the inadequate expression of one's mind.

"About that explanation," and as he spoke he became astonishingly nervous with a feeling almost of stage fright, "to which you are entitled."

"Bother explanations," Norah interrupted.

Donald paused for a minute before again speaking.

"Well, I can't make it, anyhow," he said helplessly.

It was Norah who this time held him at arms' length — a hand on each of his temples.

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"Bother explanations," she said again. "Who cares two pence for stupid old explanations. What if we have stumbled in the darkness; been bruised—even fallen into the ditch while groping—what does it matter. You were but seeking me, I you, and in the half-light we mistook some other for you and me—that is all. And here we are," she finished joyously.

"Yes, it was just you I looked for all the time, even when it may have seemed that it was somebody else. There was, and is, and will be, just you. That ends it."

"Begins it!" cried Norah.

"Begins it!" echoed Donald.

So was time forgotten, until there came a tap at the door. Why should a hostess have to tap at her own sitting-room door! What endless misunderstandings have arisen through the omission of that intuitive tap!

Mrs. McLennon announced Billy's arrival on Fidget. He had ridden the mare slowly and with care. By the time Norah heard he had arrived, Fidget was in a glowing state of polish. Old Billy could not speak for pleasure as Norah warmly pressed his hand, and when her arms were flung round Fidget's neck and her lips pressed to its glossy softness, Billy's satisfaction in his little experiment was complete.

When the time came for starting home, Norah, who

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had won over Mrs. McLennon, appeared in a borrowed riding habit, and Billy and the doctor's boy were seen putting a side saddle on Fidget.

"What's this! What's this!" exclaimed Mr. Conough. "You can't ride all that way, Norah. You're not strong enough."

"I *must* ride," said Norah entreatingly, putting her arm round the old man's neck. "Besides, unless Donald and I ride, the trap won't carry all the things."

"So he's in it, too," said Mr. Conough, in a tone that showed he had yielded, as indeed he generally did where Norah was concerned. "But ye can get into the trap along the road if ye feel tired, anyhow," he added.

The first Donald knew of the arrangement was when one of the doctor's horses appeared with Billy's saddle on. As Norah and he left the town behind them, Fidget looking a picture and pulling hard, Norah's spirits rose with every step and the color came back to her cheeks. The mare, too, was in a bounding condition of high-spiritedness. After the abnormal rainfall the country was green, and all things fresh and beautiful.

"Oh," Norah cried, "I feel like Stanley coming out of the dark forest. What a lovely fence. Watch."

Fidget took the fence in splendid style, then another,

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and yet a third, and fourth, and fifth, Norah giving her a round and coming out on the road three furlongs farther on. As she took the last fence some men working in an adjoining field let out a great cheer.

"That's *life!*" said Norah, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. Her beauty had taken on that rarer touch which only self-denying sorrow can give. Donald gazed at her, and as he gazed—he worshiped, I fear.

"Now you must behave yourself," he said with some anxiety. "I don't want to drop weights on your pleasure, but you are not strong yet. You mustn't overdo it."

"I *am* strong. Fidget and Nature and I are one—aren't we, old woman?"

She petted the mare's neck, but as Donald looked at her he felt that tears might easily mingle with her strength and beauty, like showers in the spring time.

They rode steadily on, mile after mile, past the race course, past the entrance to Bringenbogie, and past Norah's old home.

"The winkers are right off now, Donald, aren't they?" said Norah at last. "And together we will go on always," she continued gravely, "and I will never be obstinate and cruel again. Yes, I was," she urged quickly, anticipating Donald's protest. "Father knew

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all about mother's marriage before he died, Donald, and his last wish was that I should marry you, and—I said I would. His heart seemed set on our union, Donald."

"But," began Donald, with the swift jealousy of a love that claims all its right, and delights to be assured again and again of what it knows to be true, "that is not the only reason——"

"No," interrupted Norah quickly. "You see—my heart was set on it, too," and she looked at him timidly but steadily while her cheek flushed. . . . On each side of the narrow track rose the tall forest, and the doctor's horse seemed to delight in pacing along wonderfully close to Fidget.

At Deep Creek there was a short halt. Theresa had just returned from Callac, and both Norah and Donald felt some slight constraint as they greeted her. But her manner soon dispelled it. Presently, quite unobtrusively, she drew Norah away, and the two girls were some time together, being, in fact, in the little room now historical to them both. And when they reappeared the explanation over which Donald had so grievously stumbled, had, all unknown to him been generously and completely made—more generously than he perhaps deserved or would have wished, and the foundation of a lifelong friendship laid between two

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women differently situated and of different types, but who had met each other on the sacred ground of their common womanhood.

"Good-bye," Norah called as she rode away. "Tell Nicholas I think him the luckiest man in the world."

"I won't forget to tell him—but always excepting one other man I know," laughed Theresa in reply.

CHAPTER XV

ONE afternoon twelve months after Mary's departure for England, Norah, in the two-wheeler, drove briskly up to The Waterholes. She had been spending a week with Mrs. McLennon, and Donald had come to meet her on her return.

Her various packages were carried in and placed on the dining-room table.

"Whatever have you got in all those great parcels?" demanded Donald.

"Lots of things," replied Norah. "Dress material and garments of all sorts, including some perfect bargains of shirts for Uncle, and a setting of pure white leghorns. Oh, dear."

Norah, who had not taken off her hat or cloak, sat herself in heedless fashion amongst the parcels, holding the edge of the table with both hands.

"Didn't know eggs had anything to do with shirts," said Donald. "And why the sigh. What's wrong?"

"Oh, everything's wrong. I called at Bringenbogie and had lunch with Mrs. MacKinnon to-day. You

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know how swimmingly Mary had been getting on! Well, the latest news is that she has been dreadfully ill, and has lost her voice, and the doctors think she will never recover it."

"I'm very sorry," said Donald slowly. "But is she out of danger?"

"Quite. She never wrote a word of the illness until she was well again."

"That's just like her," said Donald. "She always hated a fuss."

"Her father is greatly troubled about it," said Norah. "He would have got her to come home if possible. So would her mother, but the letter contained more news."

"What was that?"

"Mary was to be married a fortnight after it was written."

Donald whistled softly.

"Who is the man?" he asked.

"A Mr. George Underhill. Mary gave no further particulars except that he is considered a rising man in the scientific world. They are going to travel to all sorts of queer places in the East. Mary hopes to go where no white woman has been."

"Well, I hope she's got a good fellow. She's worthy of the best of fellows."

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"Yes. But I haven't finished. Can you keep a secret in that big head of yours? But perhaps I shouldn't tell you."

"Then don't, although I think I can keep a secret all right."

"Well, it's just this. Mrs. MacKinnon and I talked things over, and we came to the conclusion that Mary is more than all the world to Peter; Mrs. MacKinnon fancies he asked her to marry him the last time he saw her at Bringenbogie."

Donald looked thoughtfully at Norah for a moment.

"The first part may be true," he said. "How little a man notices these things—my eyes were so fixed on you——"

"Fiddlesticks," interrupted Norah.

"Well, anyhow, I'd give anything to see Peter happy," Donald went on. "But I don't believe he ever asked Mary to marry him. He's too poor, and too proud."

"I agree with you," said Norah. "Heaven knows how it was. And Peter's such a brick—he hides everything under a jest. Supposing I hadn't had you, would you have jested?"

"Old Scratch would have had me instead, long ago," answered Donald.

Then they discussed the question of Peter and Mary

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from all points of view, but coming to no satisfactory conclusion turned to other things.

"How is the house getting on?" asked Norah.

"Finished, and all ready for its mistress. What a long, long time I have waited for you, Norah."

The new house was a neat weather-board cottage erected just in front of the hut. Donald had made things comfortable, but this was not destined to be his permanent place of abode. The site for a house on Norah's non-residential selection was too beautiful to be passed over. But the Crown Lands Act did not permit of Donald's fulfilling his term of residence on his wife's land as in the case of an ordinary C. C., and for the remainder of the term he was obliged to live where he was on pain of forfeiture. In such a case, it is true, the forfeiture might be revoked, but Donald preferred not to take the risk. So he built himself a cottage with a view to being married as soon as possible; of course he could not think of waiting until the five years' residence was fulfilled. He planted his orchard and made his permanent improvements, however, on the slope above the big waterhole, getting ready for the house he meant to have there later on.

Next day Norah saw Peter, and told him of Mary's marriage. Peter talked of the subject easily, but Norah fancied he was quieter than usual that evening,

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and he left early on his ride to his dark abode. He went into his hut, which was almost the counterpart of Donald's, lit a candle, took off his coat and proceeded to wind up his watch, looking gravely the while at Boiler, who stood in the doorway.

"Only fifteen months ago, Boiler, old man," he said, winding busily.

Then he tidied the hut, played his fiddle furiously for an hour, and went to bed.

Donald, in his bachelor days, had often maintained that wedding trips were nonsense. Yet a month later he was himself bowing to the old custom. Perhaps the pleasantest part of the trip, as so often is the case, was the return home, and the welcome that awaited him and his wife there.

The drawing- and dining-room, all in one, had been decorated with wild flowers by Old Billy, who was in a condition of vast excitement, and—was again walking on tiptoe. His present to Norah was worthy of his liberal ideas in money matters. It left him with but seven and sixpence with which to celebrate his annual holiday which came shortly after. Besides his more formal present he gave Norah a daintily plaited kangaroo skin handbag with silver mountings, and to Donald he gave an equally well plaited stockwhip with

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a carved handle, both his own handiwork. Perhaps, however, the most noteworthy of all the wedding presents was a collection of model horseshoes of the finest workmanship, mounted on dark-polished wood, with "Good Luck" in letters of polished steel at the center. It was Nicholas the Rooshian's own personal present, Theresa, his wife, giving another—also the handiwork of the giver, and designed specially for Norah. Such presents, each with infinite personal care and thought bestowed on them, have no equivalent in money.

That afternoon—the afternoon Donald and Norah returned to their new home—Old Billy grew very sentimental. He confided his feelings to Nicholas, who was there with a message from Theresa, and to take part in the welcome. 'Twas the first and last time Old Billy ever mentioned his love affair. It seemed that in his young days there lived a girl bearing the name of Charlotte Drew, and she had a sister Susan.

"I wanted her, Nicholas, an' saved her up for meself, as I thought, for munts. She liked me well, but her sister Susan, a good-lookin' enough sort of titter, hated me, an' wanted Charlotte to marry another chap with money, and I had none—never had any, somehow. It was about even money between me and the other cove when one day, at an old pub near Crookwell, I gets a bit lively. Charlotte was there, an' I tried to ride a

young colt up the public 'ouse steps on to a high veranda. He reared over backwards on me, and I spent nigh six munts in the Goulburn Hospital. Charlotte visited me once or twice, but when I come out she was going to marry t'other chap, and I knew it was Susan had turned her agin me. It's a mistake savin' a girl up, Nicholas. Another chap gets her. You want to spur along from the jump. Now she's dead, and so's he, and Susan's a rale old piker—lives up near Bathurst, an' me, wot am I—this is what I am."

Old Billy, perilously balanced on his toes, held out his hands pathetically as though to exhibit himself, and glanced down his front with his hat atilt.

"Poor, flamin' Old Billy," he went on. "He's no good ever any more. Time 'e was dead."

"How'd you know you'd 'a' been any better off with a Mrs. Old Billy? Cheer up, man," said Nicholas. And he knocked off Billy's hat, and dipped his head in a washtub of water, all in good fellowship and by way of making him regard things in a proper light. Then Billy mounted the "Old Cove," and he and Nicholas rode away together in high good humor.

CHAPTER XVI

SOON after Norah and Donald were settled in their new home a letter reached Bringenbogie stating that Mary was returning after all, her husband, of course, with her. Mr. MacKinnon's delight was unbounded; he had missed Mary sorely, though her letters to him had been constant and regular. Mrs. MacKinnon seemed equally pleased in her silent way, and, naturally enough, was anxious to see her son-in-law.

A smile of intense pleasure lighted Mr. Conough's face when he heard that Mary was returning—she wrote to him direct. His affection for her dated from her birth almost, and grew stronger as the years rolled on. Norah glanced curiously at Peter, who chanced to be present, when Mr. Conough read out Mary's letter. His face wore quite an orthodox expression, and nothing but a proper degree of pleasure was to be gleaned from his easy smile.

"What a little handful she is to be sure, getting married like that," said Mr. Conough, the open letter in his hand. "Ye never knew what Mary's next move

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would be. Isn't it sthrange to think that nearly all me little b'ys and girrls are married off. Ye should get married, too, Pether."

"Can't find a girl," replied Peter, seriously enough.

"Nothing easier. Run one down in the scrub," said Donald, glancing at Norah, who feigned non-comprehension of his speech.

In due course Mary and her husband arrived at Bringenbogie. Peter saw them a few days afterward. His meeting with Mary was commonplace enough. They chatted about all sorts of things, finding abundance to say to each other, and avoiding in easy fashion all topics of a deeper nature. Mary was slightly thinner than of old, and if anything a little more brilliant in her gaiety—the cutting brilliancy of a diamond. She even made light of the loss of her voice, and passed quickly from the subject. Her husband, Peter thought, was one of the handsomest men he had seen, big and fair, with an uncommonly strong face. He was already a noted man in the scientific world, and his wealth was great. Moreover, he was heir to a rich baronetcy, so that from a worldly point of view Mary had made what surface folk call a good match. Yet what was it her husband lacked? Personal magnetism, perhaps. With all his high qualities one could scarcely conceive him to be a leader of men because of any personal devotion.

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High carnival reigned at Bringenbogie in honor of the guests, riding and driving parties, shooting and kangaroo hunting. Mr. MacKinnon always insisted on Peter's being present. Peter, the best shot within a hundred miles, was his right-hand man in all matters concerning sport. Moreover, with his endless devices and whims, he was invaluable to a hostess for the amusement of her guests. He, therefore, a good deal against his will, was frequently present during the stay of the Underhills, and saw much of them in a general way.

Mary's sudden marriage had both pained and puzzled him—quite apart from the fact that it gave the final blow to any lingering hope of his own. It was so sudden, and her conduct seemed so strange, that he decided not to try to account for her actions in any way, but to accept them as he was obliged to accept many other facts—just as they appeared. The explanation was beyond him.

But when he saw Mary, heard the rapid sarcasms—the more cutting for the humor that was in them—that fell from her lips, heard her passing lightly over the loss of her voice, and saw the reckless gaiety that seemed to possess her—leading her often into serious bodily danger, yet which did not seem to have the spontaneity that characterized it in the days when he first knew her, he began to feel that there was a very great deal that

lacked explanation. He saw that Mary was far from being happy, and that her husband suspected the same thing. Several times Peter noted him watching her in her varying moods with grave eyes that expressed as much anxiety as pleasure.

But Peter, who had begun to imagine that he had schooled himself into a most philosophic condition so far as Mary was concerned, felt at once all the charm in her presence that had formerly so moved him. Perfection is only to be found in imperfection—such perfection at least as most poor mortals desire in this world, and Mary, faults and all, embodied within herself that which alone could give to Peter's life its crowning happiness. It was Mary, as a woman complete, with all the lights and shadows that varied her character, whom he loved.

Underhill seemed specially to like Peter, and constantly sought his society. Peter returned the liking, yet began to feel a miserable growing restraint in Underhill's or Mary's presence, which he endeavored to pass off under an easy indifference that, in Mary's case at least, unconsciously took the form of outward coldness, and he found himself avoiding them both as much as possible.

In the course of four or five weeks they paid a visit to The Waterholes, and stayed a day or two also at

Donald's place. So far as Donald was concerned, all restraint on Mary's part seemed to be swept away, and the two appeared to stand in the relation of a big brother and a wilful sister who would have her own way in all things, notwithstanding brotherly head-shakings, which, however, did not prevent Donald's joining heartily in her fun. He had been hurt by Mary's departure for England without a word of farewell to him, but now all was smooth and frank again. Mary seemed to delight in drawing him out, making assertions and setting forth beliefs with which she knew he would disagree, for the sole purpose of making him declare his views on the same. This he did in no uncertain way, but with reluctance and evidently under a sense of necessity.

"What's the use of so much talk," he would say. "Chattering about things never does any good."

"My dear man, opinions, like clothes, want airing now and then, to keep them from becoming mouldy," was Mary's reply.

"But this squabbling isn't airing opinions; it's upsetting all the clothes in the drawer without taking them out, like Peter when he's hunting for a pair of socks. You perhaps get the little thing you want for immediate use, but the general effect is confusion. Squabbling is no good."

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"A little squabbling *is* good," said Mary. "'Tis the salt that keeps sweet the butter of friendship made in this great churn of a world," and with the daintiest of little fingers she snipped up the daintiest bit of butter from a freshly churned mass in Norah's dairy, where she was sitting on a keg. She decided on its merits with that gravity of countenance and expression of superfine wisdom which people invariably assume when tasting butter.

Remembering his farewell with Mary of little more than two years ago, her unrestrained good-fellowship with Donald added to Peter's perplexity. He took refuge in the ancient conclusion that the ways of women are unfathomable. Meanwhile Mary's perilously sweet presence was becoming a little more than he could endure. He felt relieved when she and her husband returned to Bringenbogie. Yet when she was gone his state of unrest increased two-fold. Thereupon he laughed at himself, took his gun and Boiler, and disappeared for a day, albeit the curious might have had glimpses of him crawling like a serpent through rushes, or half-bogged in a swamp, or trying to conceal himself behind a tussock, or standing up to his shoulders in water, a hat and shoes his only garments.

A month rolled away, during which Peter saw the Underhills only once. But it had been arranged that

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they should spend a few more days at The Waterholes prior to leaving for England. Peter found himself looking forward to the visit with an eagerness which he strove to smother, after attempting in vain to ignore it. When they did come he generally avoided Mary, groaning in spirit to think that he had become so weak as to wish to do so. All that passed between them was of the most commonplace—not to say formal—character. But with Mary's husband it was different, and Peter set himself with stubborn pleasure to do Underhill all the honor possible. When Peter tried to make people enjoy themselves he succeeded. Underhill declared that the few days during which Peter took him specially in hand were amongst the most enjoyable he had ever spent. Peter said he was very glad of it, and there and then longed to make a humble apology to this big man—he scarcely knew for what. But he again looked forward with unacknowledged relief to the time when the Underhills would take their departure.

The evening before their leaving for Bringenbogie all hands at The Waterholes were out burning off. A hundred acres were lighted up brilliantly with the glare of fires from innumerable heaps of timber piled months before. The autumn rain had fallen early, and everywhere the grass was green, though as yet summer was hardly over. Burning off at night was a favorite plan

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of Mr. Conough's for entertaining city guests. He used to say it pleased them more than anything else, and was an easy method of getting rid of his surplus dead timber.

The darkness of the night added to the picturesqueness of the scene. Underhill, grimy and perspiring, worked with all the ardor of a new chum beginning to feel himself—now staggering under a newly fallen limb he was carrying to throw on a heap, now hurrying with a blazing piece of bark to light a fresh fire, or with a pole putting together one that had burnt itself low. The amount of hard work he had done during the last few days was something to talk about, and now he was tasting the greatest joy of physical labor, the sight of improvements wrought by his own hands. Much has been said of fairies and their wands, but never a fairy yet equaled a cunning pair of human hands backed up by strength and will. Observe, for example, that patch of green sward where an hour ago lay the head of a recently fallen tree, now all cleared away by Underhill with no end of back-crackings, and droppings of sweat, and knockings off of pieces of skin from a pair of hands used to a very different kind of toil. See the tall green grass which grew, like sweetness in difficulty, amongst the broken timber, protected from the cattle. Now will some old cow (it always seems to be an old cow

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that finds the good things first) be rejoiced when she cometh along and findeth it and maketh one job of it!

Not far from Underhill were Peter, Donald, and Norah, the two former at work while Norah sat comfortably on an accommodating stump. A twinkle from behind a pile of timber in a far corner showed where the others were busy, and presently the mounting flames revealed a gigantic figure and a white head. Holding the arm of the giant was a small figure whose auburn hair took a most enviable tint from the light of the fire. By and by the whole party gathered near a great dead gum-tree up whose barrel the fire roared, pouring in splendor from an opening fifty feet in the air. They watched it for nearly an hour, in silence for the most part, yielding to the charm of gazing at the glowing coals underneath and the flames which, like human longings, leaped out into the night, fed by the hot furnace within.

It grew late, and Peter said he must go home. The paddock where they were burning off was some distance from the house. Peter had tied his horse outside the fence, intending to leave much earlier than he was doing, but somehow he lingered on. The fire raging in the heart of the tree had a soothing fascination for him.

"Must you go?" asked Norah. "We shall wait to

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see this tree fall. What a shame it is to destroy such a monarch!"

"Yes," said Peter, "men are universal white ants. All must yield to their rapacity. But let the tree burn and fall. The fall of man created a bigger fire than ever he will do. And his end is such as becomes a monarch—the splendid end of an old Viking. Come along, Boiler."

"You'll be back to-morrow, Peter," said Norah.

"Yes, I'll be back to-morrow," he repeated.

"Let me go with you to the fence," said Mary. "I want to say good-bye to the roan, and I mightn't see him again. He has old memories about him."

Peter was strangely moved when he found Mary walking by his side, Boiler hopping at his heels, just as in days of old. They walked in silence for a hundred yards.

"What a lovely night it is," said Mary at last, in commonplace tones.

"Yes," assented Peter.

He hardly knew his own voice. It seemed like the cold voice of some invisible being speaking for him.

They walked in silence to the fence, and Mary climbed lightly over unassisted. She unhitched the horse herself, threw the reins over his head, and kissed him on the neck.

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"Good-bye, old friend," she whispered. Then she turned to Peter. He held out his hand mechanically and she took it for a moment.

"You had better run back to the others, Mrs. Underhill," he said gently. "I will watch you till you reach them."

He knew there was no need for watching her—that Mary would go quickly through the semi-darkness to the others. But the phrase was somehow pleasing to them both.

Mary half turned, then hesitated.

"Peter," she said, "you know that we return to Bringenbogie to-morrow, and that next week we leave again for England."

She paused and watched Peter for a moment. He felt from her voice and manner that her nerves were high-strung, and her face, momentarily visible in the fitful light of the fire, wore a troubled self-questioning expression. She was well aware that Peter knew what the movements of herself and her husband in the immediate future were to be, but it seemed that she had something to say yet she could not begin. Peter remained silent.

"You—you see," she went on with increasing hesitation. "I shall probably not see you again—not to speak like this, and I wanted to say—" again she stopped.

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Peter involuntarily drew a step nearer to her. "You wanted to say," he began questioningly, the old love and the old pain surging through him as he looked at the little figure in its dainty white dress.

"Yes, I wanted to explain," Mary said again, and again paused. "Peter," she broke out suddenly, "how hard you are, you will not help me in the least, and I have been so wretched. The thought of your friendship, your faithfulness and quick understanding, has been the one sunny spot in my life for months past, and now when I come you are cold and unfriendly—oh, how cruel you are."

She stood very straight, gazing it seemed beyond Peter, while her eyes were wide open and set.

"Mary," cried Peter, in a passion of feeling, "what could I do? Cannot you see how it is?—how——"

"Yes, yes, I understand," interrupted Mary quickly, "I know it is all my fault. I only am to blame, Peter, and selfish as I am—I would drag you into my unhappiness. I *did* want help from some one. You are the only one, and I don't seem to care for your sorrow, or any sorrow except my own. Oh, don't believe me, Peter," she broke off. "I *do* care—but——"

She could go no further, her lip trembled, and two large tears rolled unheeded down her cheeks while she strove to control herself. A great pity welled up in

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Peter's heart. He took her hands in his, and looked silently into her face with a longing to comfort her too great for speech. A fresh jet of flame shot out from the burning tree, and Peter saw a wonderful light in Mary's eyes. What was it that drew him to her, her to him? He knew not—he only knew that she was in his arms, that her lips—burning as in fever—were pressed against his, that she was sobbing as if her heart would break, and that the love he had so longed for had come to him at last—and come too late.

There was a terrific crash, the burning tree, splendid with fire, had fallen, its mighty outstretched hands digging deep into the trembling Earth that bore it, while amidst countless sparks a sheet of flame leaped heavenward like a departing spirit.

The old roan started violently and snorted with his head in the air, but without trying to pull away. Peter held Mary to him forgetful of everything else in the world.

"Oh, Mary, did you see it?" Norah's voice rang across the paddock.

Mary sprang away from Peter, and by an effort that seemed beyond the strength of woman, controlled her sobs, setting her lips hard. She looked at Peter and he at her, standing a few feet apart, like two hunted

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animals at bay, while Peter realized the position with a sickening hopelessness and sense of guilt.

"Come on, Mary. Has Peter gone?" rang out her husband's voice.

The fire threw a gleam over their faces, and Mary stood still with her hands clenched at her sides.

"God help us both, Mary," said Peter in a muffled voice.

"Where are you, Mary?" came Underhill's voice again, nearer this time.

"Yes, yes I'm coming," Mary called out in natural tones.

Peter watched her as she brushed away the traces of tears and got quickly over the fence. Then she glanced a good-bye as she walked rapidly away.

Peter gazed after her for a moment, then sprang on his horse and rode away into the darkness, fast and faster, while the ring of the roan's hoofs and the crashing of fallen timber accompanied him like the mocking laughter of pursuing spirits.

CHAPTER XVII

PETER dashed on through the night, whose breath played with friendly coolness on his brow and cheek. But he heeded no outward thing—his mind was filled with a tumult of conflicting thoughts that drowned each other in their own flood. Yet out of that chaotic element, high above the humiliation and regret and shame, rose a great exultation that would not be denied.

“She is just mine—whatever the world may say—mine, always. What does anything matter now.”

And he laughed as his horse, pulling strongly, dashed across a wet flat and through the timber beyond toward his master's boundary gate. Suddenly he half propped, then bounded mightily; the sapling gate crashed under the weight of his body, and over the wreck he galloped on. Peter had forgotten the gate, and unconsciously had urged the horse, who had not forgotten, onward as he tried to stop. And Peter laughed once more as he sped along beneath the starlight, heedless, for once in his life, of the possibility of stock straying.

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"So shall we over-ride all difficulties, old horse," he cried, stooping to pat the smoking neck.

When he reached the hut, he left the roan in a shed to cool for a little, and going inside, struck a match and lighted a candle. There were all the familiar objects of his every-day life—the well-beloved fiddle, the deal table, the camp-oven, the meat safe, a saucepan with three or four unused potatoes still in it, the tea-caddy on the mantel-shelf, an unwashed cup and plate and knife, and the gray ashes of a burnt-out fire. Peter gazed curiously round, half wondering if the scene were real. Was he dreaming or was he himself a dream! Had he parted from Mary in the light of the burning tree half an hour ago or not? A revulsion of feeling came over him. He picked the saucepan from the hearth and put the lid on, set it down again and laughed mirthlessly.

"That's a saucepan, all right, and those are the spuds I boiled yesterday. And they ought to have been thrown to the fowls; but then nothing has been done that ought to have been done," he said aloud.

He fell to gazing at the cold ashes, and found himself wondering in a dreamy way if that was what life would come to in the end, when all the fire of manhood had burnt out. He drew gloomy comfort from the certainty that if his life did come to that there would at all events

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be no feeling and therefore no pain; then turned impatiently from such a thought as fit only for the dead in spirit.

At that moment he heard a scratching outside. A second later Boiler came rapidly into the hut and crouched at his feet, tongue hanging out. On three legs Boiler had been unable to keep up with the roan, but made what expedition he could. He looked up at his master, panting and well pleased.

"Ah, Boiler, old man. Surely I hadn't forgotten you! Come, let us take counsel together, old lion-heart, and talk over our misery. It's a queer world this, the queerest I was ever in. Life in it is a perpetual joke, isn't it, old dog o' mine, and tragedy but a dark setting to make the joke more complete."

Peter sat on an upturned bucket, and took Boiler's disreputable head gravely between his hands.

"Now, what do you suggest, Boiler? You look ever so wise," he said, stroking with his thumb the one unscarred spot on Boiler's nose.

"Where will it all end, Boiler?" he went on, while his voice shook with the wave of emotion that passed over him, "and what can we do for the little woman we love so well?"

Boiler's face became a little blurred to Peter's sight for a moment, then cleared again. That was the ques-

tion of questions—what of Mary—so beloved—so unhappy. And as Peter sat there, varying emotions passed over him with increasing power and swiftness. Presently, as from afar, appeared the baleful phantom of jealousy with its thousand viperish tongues, each tongue whispering evil, and over against it there seemed to arise the face of Mary's husband, friendly and trusting—then, as on a great wind, there swept up the dark clouds of shame and bitter disappointment, and over that human soul burst the storm of conflicting passions.

Peter sprang to his feet.

"Let us go out into the open, Boiler," he said.

He plunged forward into the darkness, the dog at his heels, and disappeared amongst the trees.

* * * *

A faint glimmer in the East showed that day was not far away when Peter, worn out in body and mind, and with Boiler still at his heels, returned to the hut, and flung himself, dressed as he was, on the bed. In a few minutes he fell into an unquiet sleep. As he slept he thought he was in some unknown danger from which Boiler saved him, and a confused noise seemed to fall upon his ears. He turned restlessly in his sleep, and lay quiet for a time. Suddenly he sat up on his bed, his legs hanging over the side. It was broad day, though still early. Peter somehow felt uneasy, but con-

cluded the uneasiness arose from his dream. He went to the open door to look out at the morning. The first thing he saw was Boiler, lying very still a dozen feet away. Peter sprang to him. A faint light seemed to gleam in the old dog's half-closed eyes as his master leaned over him, then it glazed, and the brave heart ceased to beat—for ever.

In a second Peter guessed the cause, and glanced quickly round on all sides. Near the veranda he saw a mangled tigersnake, and hastily examining Boiler he found, just inside the lip, two little marks.

"So my dream was true!" he said aloud, gazing sorrowfully at the body. "What was it, Boiler?" he added after a moment, "number thirty-five, known record, I think."

After a little time he turned and moved slowly away to the hut, bringing with him a spade.

"Come, my mate," he said, "I'll take you to your mother, old Brown Earth. She will wrap her purifying mantle round you, as she will round me by and by; it is clean and kind."

He lifted Boiler in his arms and carried him a short distance to where an immense gum tree grew on the brow of the hill. The spot commanded a view of a considerable part of the selection, the tree being a notable landmark. Peter paused near a number of young bul-

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locks having their morning feed. They trotted away a little distance and gazed curiously at him. He had nearly reached the tree when he heard the thunder of many hoofs. Turning, he saw the cattle galloping toward him in a body. As they neared him they wheeled, and taking a half circle, drew up a hundred yards away, with many a plunge and short "baa" amongst the leaders, as though rejoicing that one who had ruled them so long lay still at last.

Peter rapidly dug a grave in the friable soil at the foot of the gum, the hole taking an irregular shape owing to the roots. The cattle still gazed from afar.

Peter laid Boiler down, the head resting as on a pillow between two great roots at the butt of the tree, and covered the body gently with earth. Then he paused for a moment.

"Good-bye," he said gently, and turning his face away he rapidly covered the head and filled in the grave, leaving a neat mound. As he walked homewards one of the bullocks with a "baa," commenced a bovine frolic in which two or three others joined him for a moment. Then they all stood still, for the most part gazing after Peter, and presently fed quietly away.

Peter did not go straight home; he walked down to the flat, broken into irregular holes, in one of which he was accustomed to swim when the water was not too

low. The sun was warm and the bank grassy. Peter, thoroughly tired, stretched himself out on the bank, listening in a dreamy way to the buzzing of a bush fly, or to the song of a magpie. He had not lain long when he became conscious of a crow flying overhead, uttering its dismal caw, and gradually drawing closer when it saw that the suspicious looking figure on the ground did not move. Presently the bird settled on the dead limb of a tree near at hand, and, his head aside, inspected Peter with one sharp eye in the fashion of knowing old crowdom.

"Believe he thinks I'm dead," said Peter to himself, "but I'm not, and he wouldn't get much picking off me if I were."

Peter's mind was curiously inert, as if resting after the tumult of the preceding night, and any outside object that occupied it for a moment without trouble was pleasing to him. He was weary of thoughts from within. After a short time he rose to his feet and the crow flew swiftly and noiselessly away, as Death might fly from a fever-stricken man when the crisis is passed, and Life once more rises triumphant.

Peter looked at the water for a space, then took off his clothes and dived in from a fallen tree trunk. The water was deliciously cool, and after a long slow swim he came out much invigorated. He let himself drip

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well, then carrying his clothes started off to the hut, which was near at hand. He put on trousers and shirt, lit a fire, and set the kettle on. Then he caught the old roan and groomed him well, giving him a feed. The kettle was boiling as he re-entered the hut, and he quickly made tea. He could eat no breakfast except a little bread and butter, but he drank three cups of the refereshing tea.

Peter was always a neat man, with a negligent neatness peculiarly his own. To-day he dressed himself with even more care than usual, and a little after nine o'clock set off to The Waterholes, horse and man both spotless. But Peter's eyes were heavy, and there was an air of unrest over all his apparent calmness. As he rode away he glanced rapidly round as if expecting a friend. But no Boiler hopped out of a shady nook at the last moment to accompany him, and he went forward at a steady walk, stopping for a moment to put in a couple of rails where his smashed boundary gate had been. When a mile or two on the road he met Nicholas the Rooshian, who, with a smile of pleasure on his dark face reined in his horse.

They chatted for a few minutes, then——

"Where's old Boiler?" said the Rooshian. "This is the first time I've seen you without him."

Peter explained what had happened.

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"Well, I am sorry," said the smith in his loud, slow tones. "He was as good an old tuppence-ha'penny as ever breathed, was old Boiler."

Nicholas was silent for a moment, then——

"Look here," he said abruptly, "I've got a young Boiler over there, as like his father as two peas—wall eye an' all. I wouldn't sell him to no man, but I'd like you to take him from me as a gift. *Poor* old Boiler."

Nicholas was so vehement that at last Peter could not but accept the gift, and when he said good-bye to the smith he rode on greatly touched by the man's thoughtful generosity, for he well knew how Boiler's son was valued.

In due course Peter reached The Waterholes. As he went through the garden he met Old Billy.

"Good-day good-day good-day good-day," said the old man, all in a breath and with no thought of familiarity. "Warm mornin'! Mrs. Underhill's inside, but the rest of 'em's gone over to where the fires was last night. They'll be back soon. Miss Norah lost a brooch by that big tree somewhere."

Peter stepped inside and looked into the open door of the drawing-room. Mary was sitting in an arm-chair with her cheek resting on her hand, but at Peter's entrance she started up. She looked pale and tired, but took a step forward and held out both hands.

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Peter took them and he and Mary looked questioningly at each other for a moment. A half smile, gentle and full of love, came over Mary's face; then she withdrew her hands and sat down—Peter near her.

"Are you not well?" said he, looking anxiously at her. As he did so he thought of another memorable interview which he had begun with almost the same words.

Again she smiled slightly, and shook her head.

"Not very. The others made me stay at home and rest while they went out. Norah will be back in a few minutes."

Mary spoke quietly and naturally. As Peter sat for a space watching her, his being became tense with an agony of impotent regret. He had much to say, yet nothing rose to his lips except passionate words that were better unsaid. So he controlled himself. He knew that if he did not, he would have to fight last night's battle all over again. Mary looked at him thoughtfully for a few minutes.

"Peter," she said slowly. "I want to tell you many things—I mean about the last two years. No—hush—don't stop me, I *must* tell you. I can tell you what I could tell nobody else in the world, not even my dear old O. C. You see——"

Mary paused and bit her lip to keep back the tears

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which came to her eyes unbidden. Peter moved toward her involuntarily with a thought to wipe them away, to comfort her with Heaven knows what foolish words and caresses, but he checked himself rigidly, although her distress moved him in the keenest sense. Was this the proud, the self-contained, sarcastic Mary?

Suddenly she sat up very straight, her face strong and defiant.

"Peter," she exclaimed, "I am not a light-minded woman," and she looked at him with fierce questioning in her gaze.

"You had no need to tell me that," said Peter gently and at once. Her glance softened as Peter knew only too well how it could soften, and after a moment she went on——

"You always did think me a lot better than I am, and I think I could not bear it if you thought lightly of me. I was going to say just now—you remember the time we parted at Bringenbogie?"

Peter moved his head slightly in assent.

"I think my love for you received its first awakening touch that day—my heart was broken for you. And now that I am fully awakened to my life, which in the past was like a troubled dream where all things were vague and unformed, it seems to me that I never could have loved anyone but you, that my love for you was

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always there, dormant until aroused into intense life by pain. And my actions since we parted then must have seemed so strange to you—and I wanted to explain—it seemed to me that you had a right to know. That was all I meant to do last night, but I had so nerved myself to overcome your reserve, that in the end I could say nothing, yet said too much. . . . I am glad. It was inevitable that you should know.”

“It was inevitable,” said Peter.

“And now I do not seek to excuse myself, still less to be pitied, but I simply want you to know all the truth. Peter,” she said, in strong tones, “when I left for England I was a girl, now I am a woman. That explains all my conduct. I was a young girl, ignorant of my own heart and deepest understanding—ignorant of all things, I think. I have suffered since then, and I have learned. After my arrival in England my voice grew stronger and more beautiful day by day, and I dreamed—I can hardly tell you what I dreamed—of a world at my feet, of adulation, of power, of what I thought was life. I had already forgotten half past things—at least they were left altogether in the background—when in the midst of my dreams I became ill and lost my voice—my beautiful voice. No mother, I think, ever mourned over her first-born as I did over my voice—all the world seemed falling round me. I

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thought of you then, Peter, and had you been at my side—but no—I was not yet awakened.”

She paused once more and Peter waited quietly.

“In the midst of my distress and weakness—I had been very ill, Peter,” she began again, “I met Mr. Underhill—he was staying at the place in the south of France to which I went when convalescent. You know I always did admire big men, big, strong, comfortable men, and Mr. Underhill was so good to me, so kind, that——”

Again she paused, gazing steadfastly before her, her face wearing an expression of strenuous mental debate.

“I must go on, Peter,” she began again hurriedly, almost entreatingly; and she looked so distressed that Peter had not the heart to stay her. “By fate or accident or through impulse, things have gone so far that it would even seem disloyal to you, to myself, not to speak. And you know so much now,” a faint smile played upon her lips, “that I want you to thoroughly understand. I have been silent all my life, and I will speak this once. Well, then,” her words came very rapidly, “perhaps ambition led me on—the high birth, the noted man, the great wealth—but I think I just wanted some strong being to mark out my way for me in the immediate future. I did not seem to care much what happened, and perhaps I married just because it was the most

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convenient thing to do, I—who of all people in the world should have known better. Oh, what a wicked little devil I am. I wonder you don't shrink from me. I bring trouble wherever I come—selfish and——”

“Hush,” said Peter, in a low authoritative tone, “I will not have you speak so. I love you—I have always loved you, without overlooking one fault. I judge for myself.”

Mary looked at him for a moment, and a gentle smile played over her face.

“I have only myself to blame,” she continued, “but the consequences of my own rashness, my own wrongful action, stifle me. It is all such a terrible wrong to the good generous man who married me. I am a daily lie, and want to be quite frank about it, to put everything in the light, but it would be cruel—where can it end, Peter? What must I do?”

He knew what to say, and full of pity for both man and wife, he grew savage when with a painful ludicrousness one of the mottoes of his childhood flashed across his mind—“Grin and bear it.” But Mary did not wait for an answer.

“They say that unhappiness is merely another name for selfishness, but however that may be I have been unhappy enough, and all through my thoughts turned to you more and more. There is that in you which,

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somehow, I have found in no other man or woman—it was only through pain that I found it. And when I came back it grew harder every day to break through the barrier of reserve between us, although in my inmost heart I knew why it existed on your part. One handgrip, one look of understanding, was all I wanted, so I told myself. But now you know everything.”

She leaned back, a hand on each arm of her chair, and looked at Peter. He sat silent for a moment, savage that she should be called upon to suffer so.

Then with heavy blows, and more perhaps for his own strengthening than hers, straightway he attacked all wild whisperings of passion, all thought of happiness to be gained at too great a cost.

“What can I say, Mary?” His voice was very quiet and earnest. “The thought of your unhappiness makes me sick at heart, yet if I try to bring you comfort it is but adding fuel to fire. There is nothing for it but to accept our pain, and go on in the way our hearts tell us is the true way, though they break. Dear, we must while our strength is with us, renounce every thought of happiness that might have been.”

Mary seemed to grow a shade paler, if that were possible.

“Our duty,” Peter went on, “lies plainly before us, and we must do it—even for our own sakes. Our love

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sprang from what is best in us. All that is good in us forms it root, and if we destroy that root by giving way to the passion that besets us, what can it lead to but unending regret; unless we grow callous to wrong and to the pain of others, which would be worse than all. But that I think would not happen. Such things are always in the one way to those who think and feel as we do—our joy would be lost in others' pain and in our sense of duty unperformed. And who shall say," he continued, his voice rising a little, his bronzed handsome face lighting up, "that even marriage is the highest consummation of a love like ours, that there is not, beyond the dark days of grief, a higher destiny for us—for our love——"

"I cannot comfort myself so," cried Mary, "at least not yet. I can see nothing but the pain. But you are better than I, Peter—I know what you say is true, and I knew you would say it."

She paused a moment, then a wonderful light came into her eyes, a shrinking timidity into her manner.

"Must you never kiss me again, Peter?" she said in a tremulous voice, so low that nothing but the ear of Love could have caught it.

"Never again, Mary," he answered, and his voice was even and clear. But his heart beat hard, and his eyes burned with a passion, deep and still.

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Mary covered her face with her hands and shrank back into her chair, while he, his features set, gazed before him unseeingly, and silence fell upon them both.

At length Mary, with a stubborn will, sat up composedly, and looked at Peter, who turned his grieved face to her as if asking pardon for his cruelty.

"Facts are simple things, aren't they?" said he, after a moment, and a flash of humor played around his eyes.

Then silence once more fell upon them for a time. Mary was the first to break it.

"Will you be living on here, Peter, or what will your movements be? Tell me," she said.

"Yes, I shall stay on here until the time is up on my selection—I owe that to my backbone." He paused for a second or two. "Every day," he continued, "I will go through the usual round. After all, that is what keeps one sane. When I get home this afternoon I will put in the three calves—I didn't do it last night. There are some cold potatoes in the safe; I will fry them for tea," said he, with grimmest humor. "And to-morrow I will shoot a lumpy-jawed bullock, and probably skin and burn him. Then I'll put up a bit of cockatoo fencing where there was a fire a couple of days ago. And you—you will go on your way across the ocean, and our daily lives will be wholly unaltered outwardly.

People will still say, 'What a clever wife Underhill has,' and 'What a merry chap that Southerden is,' but——"

He broke off abruptly and they stared hard into each other's eyes, while their breath came fast. The moment was fraught with intense danger—for them both—but accident, or what men in their ignorance call accident, came to their aid. Quiet footsteps were heard at the back entrance of the house and in the hall, then Mary's bedroom door opened gently as if some one were afraid of awakening a sleeper.

"The naughty girl's gone," said Norah's voice.

"Mary, where are you?" Underhill called out. A moment later he came into the drawing-room.

"Hello, Southerden, old chap, how are you," he said heartily, holding out his hand.

Peter's heart went out to him. He took the hand and gave it a great grip, with again the mad desire to speak out the truth and abase himself before this friendly big man. But that could not be, and Peter's humiliation was complete.

"Mary, you should be lying down," said Norah.

"Oh, I couldn't stay in a dark room," said Mary.

"Indeed I'm better here, and quite rested now."

Norah's face was troubled, and Peter knew instantly that she guessed something of the truth. She glanced

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at him, and an answering glance would have created an understanding between them. But Peter could not lay bare his inner life. His eyes steeled over in an expressionless manner, and Norah turned away, her face revealing her perplexity.

"Had we not better go and leave Mrs. Underhill in quiet?" said Peter, who could see that Mary was in utter distress, which she strove to conceal.

Underhill put his hand lightly on her forehead, and then, after lingering a moment, an anxious look in his eyes, went out with Peter.

Four months later Peter received an envelope which bore a London postmark. The note within had no formal beginning or ending, and its words, written in strong but delicate characters straight across the sheet of fine white notepaper, were few:

"I write you what may be a last memory," they ran. "Shall I ever see you again? I do not know. But your memory will abide with me—always—as that of a strong and loyal gentleman who more than honored me with his love. I grieve that I should have caused you so much pain. Dear—forgive me. I have been so selfish—so wayward—in my short life, and when my great madness was upon me the way of my heart was

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beyond my control. But you have helped me and you will believe that I tried to be good.

"My life is a very busy one just now. My father and mother are here, and I begin to hope that I have brought them together in full understanding at last. My mother, too, seems to wish me near her constantly.

"My husband often speaks of you—he thought much of you, and in truth you never had a better man for a friend. And so may God be with you always, Peter."

At about the time Peter received Mary's message Donald might one day have been seen gazing at the pigs in his newly fenced pig paddock. He appeared to be uneasy, for soon he left the pigs and inspected the cowyard, then the bullock wagon, then the vegetable patch, then the fowlhouse, finally returning to the pigs. They evidently contained the most comfort, and now they gathered round him with mellifluous grunts.

There were ten of them, all duly named by Norah, who was personally acquainted with every approachable animal on the place. That old sow with an ear bitten off, no tail, and a ring in her nose, is Fairy, and then some Sairy and Squarey, and Tater and Spud, and Dipper and Jock, and Habakuk, Priscilla and Bartholomew. The older ones amongst them have all

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lost their tails—how it happened remains a secret between themselves and dead Boiler. He always had a passion for pig's tail. But at the present moment Donald had an inward kind of expression on his face, and does not seem to see the pigs, notwithstanding that Bartholomew—a gentlemanly white barrow, has put his forefeet on the end of the trough and is twitching his inquisitive snout not a yard away, while his tail is curled into a note of interrogation.

A heavy step came up behind Donald and he turned toward Doctor McLennon with a beseeching countenance. The Doctor's words were brief:

"She's safe," he said.

Donald grasped his hand in a pitiable state of gratitude.

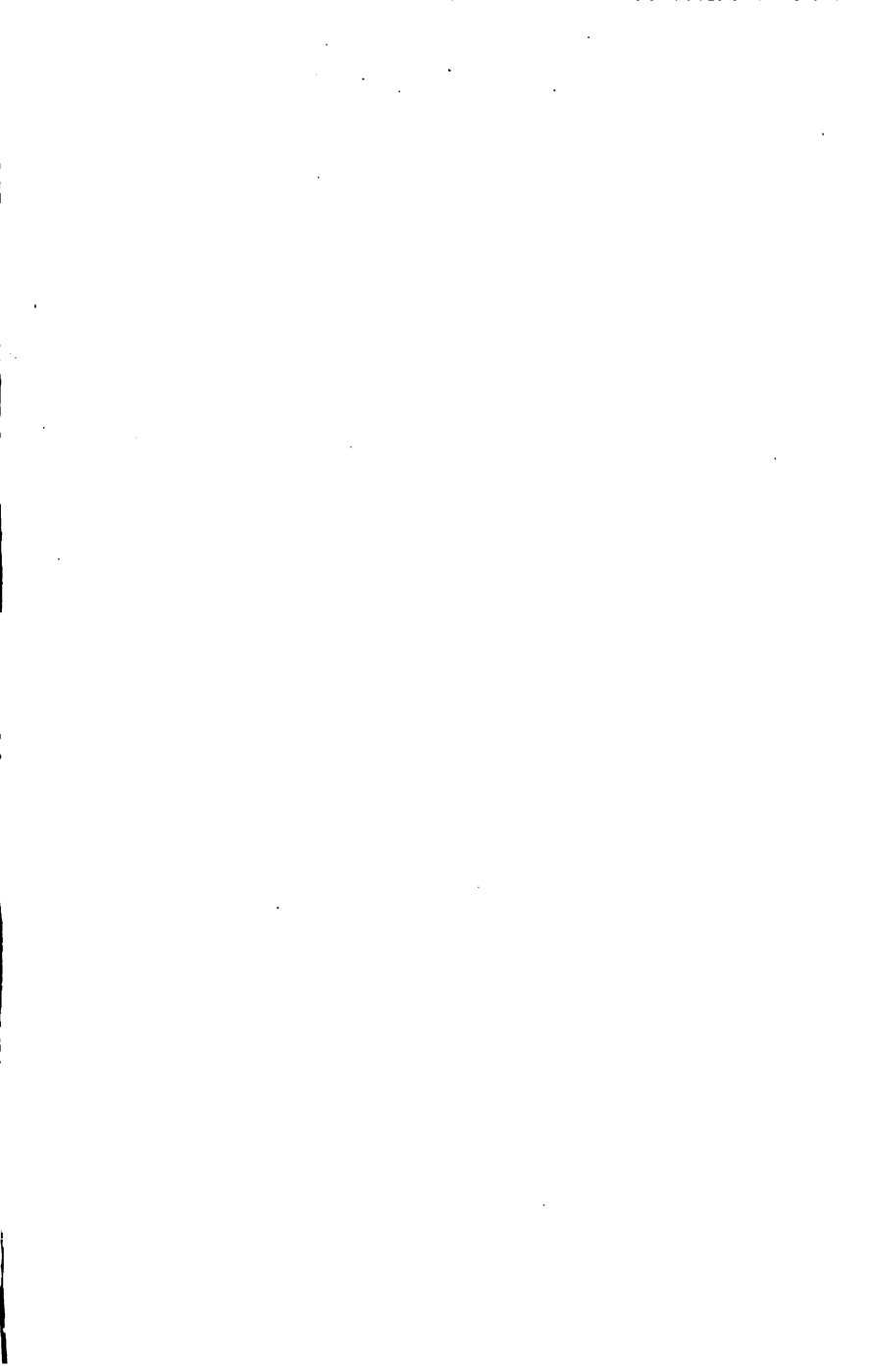
"Son," said the Doctor.

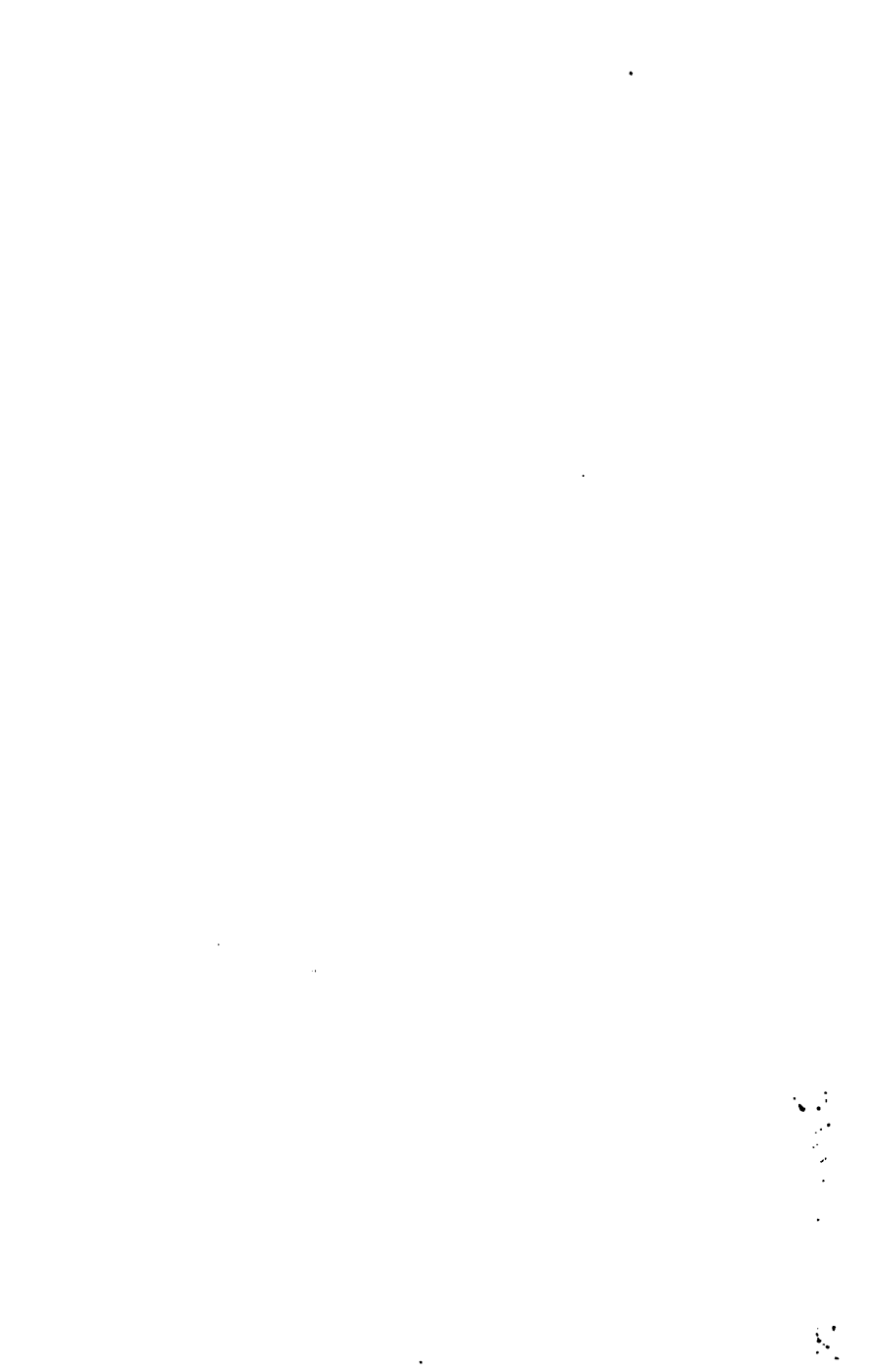
The fence shook as a heavy hand came down upon it.

"I'll make him the best judge of sheep in New South Wales," exclaimed the proud father.

THE END







Schleanning

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